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People attend the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, Nov. 12. (CNS/Reuters/Yves Herman)

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The U.N. climate conference that ended Nov. 13 in Glasgow, Scotland, was billed as the "last best chance" to avert global warming's most catastrophic impacts.

But although it made some progress, faith groups say it is not enough. Even if countries meet their current greenhouse gas emission-reduction targets, the planet is still on track to warm by a dangerous 2.4 degrees Celsius — or 4.3 degrees Fahrenheit — by the end of the century.

Those who praised the conference's final agreement said the negotiated pact was the best that could be achieved by nearly 200 countries with different interests and expectations. Critics said it fell too far short, especially in assisting countries already suffering significant damage from droughts, more severe storms and sea level rise, all exacerbated by climate change.

Even Alok Sharma, who presided over the conference, known as COP26, acknowledged the shortfall: "We can now say with credibility that we have kept 1.5 degrees alive. But, its pulse is weak and it will only survive if we keep our promises and translate commitments into rapid action."

Increasingly, voices of people of faith have been rising above the fray. Pope Francis and other faith leaders met with scientists and spoke out before the conference, and Catholics were among the groups that did advocacy work and participated in protests during the meeting. Even secular media have taken note of the role played by faith groups, and the U.N. Environment Program highlights the importance of religious organizations in following up the agreement.

Around the world, Catholics have joined to create environmental networks in the Amazon Basin, the Gran Chaco region of Paraguay and Argentina, Mesoamerica, Asia and Oceania, and the Congo Basin.

The U.S. church trails in this regard. Although a few bishops have spoken consistently and forcefully about climate issues, there has been no statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops since "Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good" in 2001. At that time — pre-Francis — the bishops hedged on the science, but were clear about Catholics' individual and collective responsibility to protect the environment for future generations and ensure equitable solutions for those most vulnerable to climate change.

Since then, as the scientific consensus has become clearer and Francis has made climate his cause, they have been strangely silent. Draft financial guidelines discussed Nov. 16, during the bishops' annual meeting, encourage shareholder engagement with companies on climate-related issues, rather than divestment, according to Catholic News Service. Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego reportedly questioned the scant mention of fossil fuels and called that section "weak."

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At the heart of the climate crisis lies a simple truth that Francis has stated clearly: Climate change results from a global economic system based on consumerism that fails to consider the environmental costs of the goods and services humans produce and purchase. And those who suffer most from global warming are those who have done the least to cause it.

The outcome of COP26 raises clear justice issues for people of faith.

Agreements were negotiated to stop deforestation, establish rules for trading carbon credits and provide assistance to the most vulnerable countries. These require monitoring and transparency, to ensure that pledges are fulfilled and that local people — especially Indigenous and other traditional communities — participate in the development of policies affecting them. It is crucial that the agreements result in more, not less, equality among peoples.

These are matters of justice on which Catholics must speak and act, as people of faith, as consumers and as advocates for public policies that align with Gospel values.

As individuals, Catholics can become responsible consumers, learning about the sources of the products we buy and purchasing from companies that have eliminated deforestation and other environmental harm from their supply chains, beginning at the source.

Collectively, Catholics can join groups that work to safeguard the rights of Indigenous and other traditional peoples, advocate for assistance to vulnerable countries already suffering from the impacts of climate change and support the shift away from fossil fuels.

Ultimately, the world must agree to the one market mechanism that no one wants to talk about: We must begin to include environmental costs in the price of everything we purchase. That would cause those of us in wealthier countries to consume less, travel less and generally use the world's resources more responsibly, while enabling those who have less to reach a decent standard of living.

Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home" calls us to an ecological conversion, and the Laudato Si' Action Plan launched officially on Nov. 14 offers guideposts. As Catholics, our mission is to examine our lives honestly and simplify our lifestyles, advocate for policies designed to make real progress on emission reductions, and let our church leaders know that we want them to follow Francis' lead.

This story appears in the **COP26 Glasgow** feature series. View the full series.
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