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Pope Francis listens to Catholic university students during a virtual dialogue Feb. 24, which Loyola University Chicago hosted in collaboration with Catholic universities and colleges in North, Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean. Emily Burke is at top right; Henry Glynn is at bottom left. (EarthBeat screenshot/YouTube)



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Henry Glynn was blunt as he spoke directly to the pope.

"Our experience is priests never discuss climate change," the Creighton University junior said during a virtual conversation that 130 university students and young Catholics held Thursday with Pope Francis as part of a listening session for the synod on synodality hosted by Loyola University Chicago.

The issue of climate change, Glynn said, is "the issue that profoundly worries our generation."

As his synodal group, consisting of students in the central U.S. and Canada, conversed before their meeting with Francis, he said they discerned "a shared frustration" about the lack of leadership they see from the U.S. church on the issue of accelerating temperatures that threatens the entire planet.

"Our generation values authenticity, and deplores hypocrisy," Glynn told Francis. "U.S. Catholic leaders' failure to share and enact the church's own climate teachings is disillusioning young people," adding that the similar failure among political leaders "sows doubt and cynicism among us."

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The moment was one of the most direct critiques delivered during the nearly two-hour discussion. And Glynn, an intern in Washington, D.C., with the Catholic Climate Covenant whose day began with a Google search about what to wear to a papal audience, was determined not to miss his chance to take his generation's frustrations straight to the pope.

"I think I would have been more nervous to say those things if I never read *Laudato Si*', or if I didn't know anything about Pope Francis," he told EarthBeat as he was still

processing the experience hours after the Zoom session. "I think I would have thought that, 'Like really? I'm going to tell him that his bishops aren't doing their job, like to his face? I don't know if that's a good idea.' "

Part of what gave him the confidence is that his synodal cohort came with receipts.

A study co-authored by his fellow panelist, Emily Burke, found that less than 1% of columns by U.S. bishops in diocesan newspapers have mentioned climate change in the six-plus years since Francis issued his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home."

Burke, a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who attended classes around the meeting with Francis, said it was "surreal" to hear the research she conducted while at Creighton cited to the pope. She watched closely as Francis sat up in his chair and took notes as Glynn summarized the silence and inaction from their church leaders around climate and environmental issues.

"And I'm sure he's well aware of it, but that lay people are aware of it, too, and young people are aware of it, too, I think is important for him to hear," she said.

The idea to raise the topic of climate change with Francis emerged from the biweekly meetings their synodal group held in the month they had to prepare. Tasked with looking at the root causes of migration, the group — which included a number of students who were migrants or had migrant family members — eventually talked about climate. The United Nations estimates more than 20 million people annually are displaced by extreme weather events, which are intensifying and becoming more prevalent as global temperatures rise. A 2017 study from Cornell University projected there could be as many as 1.4 billion climate refugees by 2060.

Or, from the perspective of many of the students in the group, before they reach age 60.



Pope Francis speaks during a virtual dialogue with Catholic university students from across the Americas Feb. 24. (NCR screenshot/YouTube)

"It's a universally anxiety-inducing thing to talk about and worry about for young people, especially college students," said Burke, who also works with the Catholic Climate Covenant and was part of Creighton's fossil fuel divestment campaign.

With a shared sense of concern, they decided to raise it with Francis, including their perception that their leaders, in the church and outside it, were not taking climate change seriously.

"It was just seen as a moment that we didn't really want to waste, which caused a lot of students to want to be blunt and want to be really real and bring attention, sort of shine a light on some of the problems that we've seen," Burke told EarthBeat.

In his response, Francis didn't directly address the group's critique of U.S. hierarchy, but he encouraged them to choose sincerity and "refuse any forms of hypocrisy."

"Don't fall into the trap of hypocrisy, never in your life. Because hypocrisy poisons everything," Francis said, whereas "sincerity really helps you to live in harmony with ecology, with the rest of the world."

Francis also addressed Burke's proposal that the church establish centers to train young people and others in the spirituality and ethics needed for an ecological conversion, but also in the ways of nonviolent direct action as a last resort to move seemingly immovable people to take climate change seriously.

"We need the prophecy of nonviolence," and it's the youth who must bring that vision forward, Francis said.

"Violence always destroys nature," he added, and referenced his recent critique that plastic pollution "kills everything."

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The Creighton students were also struck by a Spanish proverb the pope has regularly quoted: God forgives always, we forgive sometimes but nature never forgives. Glynn said that captured the essence of what they hoped to convey, "basically that to repair the climate means that we must repair our relationships with each other and with God."

As for what they want from their church leaders, they said talking about climate change at all is an important first step. For Glynn, it wasn't until he came to Creighton that he read *Laudato Si*' or saw his Catholic faith connected with social issues like climate change — connections that came clearer into view last summer when he lived with a family in Tanzania who lost a tomato crop to an unseasonable frost.

From there, they'd like to see the church tap into its teachings and operations — through its buildings, schools and other institutions — in a way to become a leader in carbon neutrality and environmental sustainability. For instance, through the Laudato Si' Action Platform.

"If we're a church that writes these documents and says we need to pay attention to these social issues … I would love to see a church fully embracing that Gospel message for itself," Glynn said.

Both students came away from their Zoom-room encounter with the pope feeling empowered by the experience, grateful for the opportunity, and just as important, heard by their church.

Said Burke, "I don't really know if anybody knows what will come of it at this point, but I'm hoping that this is sort of a beginning and not an end to uplifting young Catholics' voices."

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