Opinion
EarthBeat



Activists display prints replicating solar panels during a rally to mark Earth Day at Lafayette Square, Washington, April 23, 2022. (AP/Gemunu Amarasinghe)



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One of the few advantages of being old is knowing that I won't be around when the impact of global warming becomes catastrophic. My generation has lived with the possibility of human extinction our whole lives. After the "greatest generation" won World War II, my generation had to live through the Cold War knowing we could blow ourselves to smithereens with the nuclear weapons our elders created. As is clear from Vladimir Putin's nuclear saber-rattling after he did not get his way in Ukraine, that is still a possibility.

But our more immediate concern today is the inevitable warming of the planet. For decades, scientific reports have warned that the apocalypse is coming. Scientists debate when we will reach the tipping point: Will it be when Greenland's ice sheet slips into the sea? When the Amazon and African rainforests die? When the defrosting Arctic tundra releases megatons of methane?

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Unless we stop heating the planet with greenhouse gases, the ice in glaciers and at the North and South poles will disappear. Coastal areas and their cities will be flooded, causing huge population displacements and millions of climate refugees. Rivers fed by glaciers will dry up, weather patterns will alternate between droughts and floods and agricultural production will be disrupted, causing food shortages and

famines. Seas will turn acidic, killing coral reefs, the nurseries of the oceans.

But while I'm glad I will not have to live through this catastrophe, I fear that when my generation stands before God in final judgment, we will not have an answer to his questions. "You knew what was coming, why did you not do anything?" Instead, it was "Drink and be merry for tomorrow we will die."

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But not everyone ignored the coming calamity. Some will be congratulated and welcomed into the kingdom of heaven. These people give me some hope as we celebrate Earth Day 2023.

My biggest source of consolation is that thanks to Pope Francis, the Catholic Church is on the right side of this history. In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*', Francis warned us about global warming and our impact on the environment. To be a good Christian requires caring for the earth, God's creation. Other religious leaders have also spoken out. This is important because religion has historically had the motivating power to get people to sacrifice their self-interest for a greater good.

I also find hope that more and more people are accepting the reality of global warming. Even fossil fuel companies, having given up on denying global warming, are on the defensive. They and their Republican supporters now argue for a long transition period to a green economy. Sadly, we don't have time for a long transition.



A man looks out at wind turbines in Livermore, Calif., Wednesday, Aug. 10, 2022. (AP/Godofredo A. Vásquez)

The change in public opinion is reflected in the purchasing choices people are making. People now understand that LED lightbulbs, though more expensive at the store, save money in the long run and are better for the environment than incandescent. The demand for electric cars has outpaced expectations and, as the Biden administration pressures auto companies to increase production, should become cheaper. Heat pumps are getting more popular, and solar panels on roofs are becoming a common sight.

Corporate America now recognizes that there is money to be made in a green economy. Solar and wind energy is now cheaper than fossil fuels. The race is on to develop better batteries and other products to take advantage of the new energy reality.

This change in public opinion has made it easier for government officials to buck special interests and support environmental policies. The so-called Inflation

Reduction Act passed last year is the most significant commitment of resources ever to fight climate change.

Even farmers are waking up to the impact of global warming on their weather-dependent livelihoods and changing their practices. More farmers are planting cover crops for winter. The whole idea of plowing fields is being questioned. Using farm waste as biofuel is being investigated.

Wind turbines are constructed at a wind energy farm in Mount Storm, W.Va., in this Septembe

Wind turbines are constructed at a wind energy farm in Mount Storm, W.Va., in this September 2007 file photo. (CNS photo/Jim West)

Scientists are accompanying them on this transition by developing new perennial strains of rice that will not have to be replanted every year. Similar advancements for corn, wheat and other grains would revolutionize agriculture and free farmers from dependence on seed producers and reduce carbon emissions.

Seaweed farming is another promising type of agriculture that provides a source of food while reducing the amounts of carbon dioxide in the ocean. Better yet, some types of seaweed can be used as feed for livestock, which has been found to reduce their methane emissions, a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

Scientists are the real heroes in the fight against climate change. They warned us of the dangers ahead, and they have also worked tirelessly to find practical solutions.

They are involved in saving the planet in obvious ways — developing hydrogen power, which in the long term could be a clean and abundant source of energy — and in ways we can't conceive. The hope offered by seaweed farms, for instance, is threatened by a disease that is wiping out starfish, the natural predators of sea urchins, which have proliferated and ravaged seaweed beds off the West coast of the United States. Ecological biologists are racing to find a cure.

But the scientists are running out of time. We all must do what we can to stop climate change, and we must act now.

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We still are not taking the war on global warming seriously enough. We have committed more funds to stopping the Russians in Ukraine than we have committed to stopping global warming. Europe has shown that people can deal with dramatic disruptions in their lives when Russian gas is suddenly cut off. We have not been willing to make similar sacrifices to deal with global warming.

Earth Day for me will be a day of fear and hope. Hope because humanity is moving in the right direction; fear that we will not make it in time.