Rubbish, most of which is plastics, is seen along a shoreline in Jakarta, Indonesia, in this June

Rubbish, most of which is plastics, is seen along a shoreline in Jakarta, Indonesia, in this June 21, 2019, file photo. (CNS photo/Reuters/Willy Kurniawan)



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Perhaps the strongest message to emerge from Villanova University's April 18 Second Annual Anti-Poverty Symposium — "Unitas in Action: Fighting Poverty and Living Sustainably" — is that the intersection between poverty and environmental destruction is no coincidence. In the global chain of pollution and profit, poor communities are almost always adversely and disproportionately impacted.

A host of experts and activists gathered at Villanova's Connelly Center to discuss this literally toxic reality, and how collective action — the "Unitas" of the

symposium's title — can attempt to effectively address it.

With Earth Day approaching April 22, Augustinian Fr. Art Purcaro, assistant vice president of the Office for Mission and Ministry at Villanova, told OSV News it's "an excellent time to remind ourselves that God created enough for all forever."

"It is certainly not in God's plan that some people be poor and in need of the very basic essentials," he said, "while others hoard and accumulate what God has gifted for the good of all."

Purcaro's emphasis was reflected throughout the day's panels, the first of which included Cardinal Peter Turkson, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, and Cardinal Robert W. McElroy of San Diego, in discussion with Villanova grad José Aguto, executive director of the Catholic Climate Covenant.

Turkson — who was instrumental in the process informing Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment, "*Laudato Si*'" — proposed "seven C's" to both understand the encyclical and guide ecological action. These are continuity (Francis continues the teaching of his predecessors); collegiality (Francis developed the encyclical in solidarity with his brother bishops); conversation (Francis calls for a discussion of our common environmental challenge); care (for creation and the poor); conversion (change of lifestyle); citizenship (education in ecological responsibility); and contemplation (prayer and reflection).

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Francis notes in "*Laudato Si*'" that "the same mindset which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty. A more responsible overall approach is needed to deal with both problems: the reduction of pollution and the development of poorer countries and regions."

McElroy admitted it's easy to feel overwhelmed. "I think of the movie that won the Academy Award this year — we're called to do everything, everywhere, all at once."

"This is not something that we can remain calm or passive about," he added. "It's something we have to take up as part of our vision as disciples of Jesus Christ, and

within the whole world community."

Ecological inspiration — and a model for action — can be found in Christ's parable of the sower, said McElroy, noting that Jesus speaks the parable at a time when the disciples are "overwhelmed, too."

Like the sower, McElroy said, Catholics are called to rejoice in the harvest. He noted ecological successes like halting the planned construction of a cement factory in a poor area of the Diocese of San Diego, which would have demonstrably worsened air quality for people. But the perceived "rocky and thorny ground" shouldn't be overlooked, he added, because unexpected allies can sometimes be found there. Finally, like the sower, Catholics plant, move on, and may never see the harvest. "But we should have hope that endures," McElroy said, "that it will come."

Best-selling environmental authors Naomi Klein (*How to Change Everything: The Young Human's Guide to Protecting the Earth and Each Other*) and Raj Patel (*Inflamed: Deep Medicine and the Anatomy of Injustice*) discussed the "right to be hopeful" while facing the enormity of a broken ecosystem.

Students walk toward St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University n

Students walk toward St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University near Philadelphia March 11, 2021. (CNS photo/Chaz Muth)

Patel recalled attending the United Nations Climate Change Conference and similar events where exhibitors presented technologies to offset the environmental impact of polluting industries — a kind of "trade show at the end of the world."

"Essentially, these technologies were technologies designed to keep everything the same," Patel explained. It's "innovation designed precisely to allow these monopolies to flourish," but not to change their practices.

Organizing change, Patel said, "can only move at the speed of trust. You can't really accelerate people's trust in a movement that seems relatively new. So organizing through the church ends up being fairly successful in some places."

Klein suggested "connecting the dots between a broken economic system, a broken social system, and a broken planet actually helps us move faster." She favored focusing upon "closing the gap between words and deeds. And that's where maybe

some credible hope starts to sprout."

Villanova University presented its own 10-year (2020–2030) sustainability plan and goals, which include 100% electricity purchased from renewable energy; 0% waste to landfill or incineration; elimination of single-use plastics; 50% emissions reduction; and more.

Bill McKibben, co-founder of 350.org, an international movement focused on renewable energy, joined Emmy Award-winning producer Scott Ferguson, executive producer for HBO's hit series "Succession," to examine inequality.

McKibben noted "the iron law of climate change: the less you did to cause it, the sooner and the harder you're hit by it. And it just continues to exacerbate inequality." Listing several examples, McKibben said the most devastating is "taking away the weather on which people depend to grow the food they need to survive — and increasingly, the actual land on which they're trying to grow it. That's why the question of climate change is of enormous practical significance."

A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova Univer

A pillar is visible in front of St. Thomas of Villanova Church on the campus of Villanova University near Philadelphia March 11, 2021. (OSV News/CNS file/Chaz Muth)

Ferguson wondered aloud why — since his industry always eyes the bottom line — corporate and municipal entities aren't rushing to embrace cheaper, less-polluting renewable energies. McKibben attributed it to both inertia and infrastructure.

In an afternoon panel focusing on Native American wisdom and storytelling to heal lands and end poverty, Yanenowi Logan, co-vice president of the National Congress of American Indians, spoke of environmental racism.

"I want to see that our health is taken care of, and that we're not placed in sacrifice zones around the country," she said. "We can sit up here and we can talk about the flowery and beautiful, natural parts of our traditions — but we have real demands, and we have real requests."

Bringing global perspectives to climate crisis solutions includes realizing "we can't 'green capitalism' our way out of this issue. We need to really rethink our economic

structures," Wanjiku Gatheru, founder and executive director of Black Girl Environmentalist, said in the following panel. "There's no such thing as profit on a planet where people aren't able to live a decent life."

Environmental racism was keenly felt in the day's final panel, which brought local climate crisis perspectives — particularly in neighboring Chester, Pennsylvania, a 72% Black community with a poverty rate almost three times higher than the national average that's also home to four toxic and hazardous waste treatment facilities. The life expectancy of Chester's residents is 14 years shorter than surrounding areas.

After detailing various community struggles with monied and political interests, Zulene Mayfield, chairperson of Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living, said, "We have no choice but to fight. ... It's environmental violence. It's environmental genocide."