Opinion
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A towboat passes a coal-fired power plant along the Ohio River Sept. 10, 2017, in Stratton, Ohio. (CNS/Reuters/Brian Snyder)



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Pope Francis' much-anticipated addendum to his 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," is a renewed clarion call to address climate change and to promote integral ecology. But if the reception of the original encyclical itself is any indication, the new apostolic exhortation, *Laudate Deum*, likely will not have much of an impact here in the United States.

Even though *Laudato Si*' was released more than eight years ago, only a handful of U.S. dioceses have a dedicated office for care of creation. Furthermore, the climate crisis is rarely the topic of homilies or Mass intentions. According to a recent Pew study, 41% of Catholics who attend Mass regularly (at least monthly) reported no discussion of climate change. Only 8% of Catholics who attend Mass regularly said climate change was discussed a great deal or quite a bit.

The reasons for this perfunctory response to an important moral issue are manifold.

For decades, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and many devout American Catholics have focused on the scourge of abortion. Even after the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe* v. *Wade*, there are still Marches for Life and other anti-abortion campaigns. In my own parish, even during the Season of Creation (Sept. 1-Oct. 4), announcements and participation emphasized the annual March for Life in D.C., with no mention of the new exhortation on the climate crisis.



Garbage and debris pile up behind the Markland Locks and Dam on the Ohio River Sept. 14, 2017, in Florence, Indiana. (CNS/Reuters/Brian Snyder)

To its credit, my diocese in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has begun highlighting care for creation within its Office for Evangelization. It hosted a series of presentations this past fall, including my own, on *Laudato Si*'. Unfortunately, only a handful of parishioners actually attended. It seems that climate change and the environment are still not on many Catholics' radars.

To be fair, many are simply following church leaders who have effectively under-prioritized care for creation. The U.S. bishops' "Introductory Note" in their "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship" voting guide has muddied the warming waters with its references to abortion as the "preeminent" moral issue. Catholics have thus justified focusing their energy and resources on abortion, neglecting other grave moral issues like climate change. However well-intentioned, this can lead to support for candidates who claim to oppose abortion while dismissing climate change. Extreme weather and climate events represent a global problem that has already

killed millions, primarily in poorer nations.

Through misguided political preferences, we have not only lost precious time to avert worse climate impacts, but we have also institutionalized climate inaction through policies and legislation. The original draft of the Inflation Reduction Act included many ambitious climate initiatives that were eliminated in the final package, as EarthBeat reported. Some jurisdictions have even enacted restrictive zoning regulations for renewable energy projects.

There is now a supermajority of conservative Supreme Court justices who favor less federal regulation and agency authority, which can undermine environmental protections. In a recent case involving the Environmental Protection Agency, the conservative court ruled against delegated authority, nullifying the EPA's ability to regulate gas emissions and help curb climate change. Ironically, these "pro-life" justices are more likely to rule in favor of polluting industries' rights to resources than individuals' rights to life and a healthy environment.



A depot used to store pipes for TC Energy Corp's planned Keystone XL oil pipeline is seen Jan. 25, 2017, in Gascoyne, North Dakota. (CNS/Reuters/Terray Sylvester)

Another reason why *Laudate Deum* probably won't make it into many homilies or prompt any marches is due to the faith community's misperceptions of the climate crisis. Conservative policymakers have benefited from millions of dollars in contributions from the fossil-fuel industry — the purveyors of products that cause climate change in the first place. Recently revealed documents show that Exxon promoted a climate-disinformation campaign for years.

Conservative media's disinformation campaigns about climate change have been effective at sowing doubt. Millions have accepted inaccurate information. Many have labeled climate change a "liberal" issue, with solutions that are suspect and should be opposed. In fact, that includes conservative priests who paradoxically judge Francis as too liberal for his emphasis on social and environmental justice, even though Catholics are bound to honor pontifical teachings like *Laudato Si*' and *Laudate Deum*.

Francis decries and corrects this sort of disinformation in *Laudate Deum* in a section aptly titled, "Resistance and confusion."

There is a cognitive dissonance associated with admitting that climate change is a serious problem after years of believing it is a hoax, a normal earth cycle or just a low-priority issue. Devout members of any institution who have believed something for a long time can be psychologically blind to failures or misleading from their institutions or leaders. This includes information about climate change: its existence, causes, environmental harm, economic impact and existential threat to life.

Indeed, it is less threatening to our egos and peace of mind to maintain a deep-rooted belief that climate change is a nonissue, than to realize that climate scientists (the experts) have been right all along. Doing so would mean admitting one's own error, one's inadequacy at defending life, or one's gullibility to disinformation. We tend to unconsciously block acceptance of ideas that contradict our own long-held convictions.

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Given the stakes, what are Catholics who recognize the moral obligation to fight climate change to do?

Reading both *Laudato Si*' and *Laudato Deum* is a start. These admonitions from a pope who is at once wise, compassionate and scientifically literate offer guidance and hope. We also need to be open to the possibility of being wrong and learning more. If you haven't heard about integral ecology and care for creation from your pastor or bishop, ask and offer to help. Each of us has the power to help solve the climate crisis.

As Francis says in *Laudate Deum*, "There are no lasting changes without cultural changes, without a maturing of lifestyles and convictions within societies, and there are no cultural changes without personal changes." He adds:

> The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is contributing to greater concern about the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and indignation at the lack of interest shown by the powerful. Let us realize, then, that even though this does not immediately produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society.

Just as Catholics firmly believe in the power of faith and community to save lives by opposing abortion, so too can we help protect life by fighting climate change. As Francis exclaims in *Laudato Si*', "All it takes is one good person to restore hope!"