Opinion
NCR Voices

Man with mask holds sign that reads, "Climate Emergency."

A climate activist wearing a protective mask protests June 8 while smoke and haze caused by wildfires in Canada pass through New York City. (OSV News/Reuters/Amr Alfiky)



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The spirit was willing, but the flesh is weak. Pope Francis desperately wanted to fly to Dubai Dec. 1 to speak at the United Nations Global Climate Change Conference, known as COP28. The pope's recent apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, released on Oct. 4, expressed the urgency he attaches to the issue of combating climate change. His determination to make it to Dubai was a kind of exclamation point to that document even though he is not able to make it to the meeting due to inflammation of his lungs.

Will it work? In *Laudate Deum*, the pope was deeply concerned about the lack of progress that has been made so far in confronting the environmental crisis. He wrote:

> If there is sincere interest in making COP28 a historic event that honors and ennobles us as human beings, then one can only hope for binding forms of energy transition that meet three conditions: that they be efficient, obligatory and readily monitored. This, in order to achieve the beginning of a new process marked by three requirements: that it be drastic, intense and count on the commitment of all. That is not what has happened so far, and only a process of this sort can enable international politics to recover its credibility, since only in this concrete manner will it be possible to reduce significantly carbon dioxide levels and to prevent even greater evils over time.

The problem in those sentences is the word "binding." Yes, the Paris Agreement is a binding, legal treaty, in which countries pledged to reduce greenhouse gases so that global temperatures are held "well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels." The agreement, signed in 2015, took legal effect the next year when enough countries had ratified it. Signatories included 194 countries and the European Union, aiming to achieve net zero CO2 emissions by 2050. Alas, most countries are nowhere near meeting the goals that would make it possible to meet the Paris targets, according to the United Nation's preliminary "Global Stocktake" report that came out in September. Why?

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Let's look at the situation in America. President Barack Obama formally entered the U.S. in the Paris Agreement in conjunction with China in 2016. He did not submit the treaty to the U.S. Senate for ratification: It would have failed. That was the summer when the Senate refused to even vote on the nomination of then-Judge Merrick Garland to join the Supreme Court! Legal scholars argue that the Paris Agreement did not create a new legal obligation, but simply built on the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. So much for the legal problem. The political problem is that Obama pledged the U.S. government to a set of goals to be realized in the distant future, but he wasn't able to prevent the election of Donald

Trump as his successor. And Trump pulled the U.S. out of the Paris Agreement. The recent elections in Argentina and the Netherlands bode ill for those countries' efforts to protect the environment.

Everything Francis writes in *Laudate Deum* is true. Noting that eight years had passed since he issued his landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the pope observes

> with the passage of time, I have realized that our responses have not been adequate, while the world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point. In addition to this possibility, it is indubitable that the impact of climate change will increasingly prejudice the lives and families of many persons. We will feel its effects in the areas of healthcare, sources of employment, access to resources, housing, forced migrations, etc.

All true. Damning and true.

President Joe Biden stands at lectern, speaking, while three women stand nearby. The wall be

U.S. President Joe Biden delivers remarks on the White House initiative on climate change, at the White House in Washington, Nov. 14. (OSV News/Reuters/Tom Brenner)

The Holy Father's hopes for overcoming the technocratic paradigm and "reconfiguring multilateralism" are all well-stated, but I hope in Dubai the countries will focus less on those more abstract points and try to change the emphasis to the very practical and immediate. It is less important that countries pledge themselves to some far-off goals that they may or may not meet. It is more important that they start doing something now, that they set goals for reducing climate emissions in the next 12 months, not just in the next 12 years. President Joe Biden has done a lot on climate, but if he had pledged to convert the fleet of government-owned vehicles to electricity by the end of his first term, how would Detroit have responded? What would the cost of an electric car be?

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It would also be great to see the countries at COP28 move on funding a loss and damage program to help poor countries that are already coping with the ill effects of climate change. Not "pledges" for some future date, but cash now.

Government leaders also need to focus on creating a just transition to an economy built on sustainable energy. Pope Francis in *Laudate Deum* wrote:

> It is often heard also that efforts to mitigate climate change by reducing the use of fossil fuels and developing cleaner energy sources will lead to a reduction in the number of jobs. What is happening is that millions of people are losing their jobs due to different effects of climate change: rising sea levels, droughts and other phenomena affecting the planet have left many people adrift. Conversely, the transition to renewable forms of energy, properly managed, as well as efforts to adapt to the damage caused by climate change, are capable of generating countless jobs in different sectors. This demands that politicians and business leaders should even now be concerning themselves with it.

This interview with Sharan Burrow, president of the International Trade Union Confederation, provides valuable insight into the problem and the solutions for achieving a just transition.

U.N. conferences are not known for the sense of urgency they achieve. But the clock is ticking. "Parliament cannot bind a future parliament" is a maxim of the British Constitution and a factual statement about all political regimes. Instead of focusing on far-off goals, I hope the countries of the world to take action now. Start anywhere. Just start.