News
EarthBeat



John Kerry, U.S. special presidential envoy for climate, attends the formal opening of the U.N. Climate Change Conference COP28 at Expo City Nov. 30, 2023, in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. (CNS/Courtesy of UN Climate Change COP28/Mahmoud Khaled)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org

Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

January 16, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

John Kerry, a longtime U.S. politician who has been dedicated to addressing climate change and has welcomed and amplified Pope Francis' intervention on the issue, will be leaving his post as the lead climate negotiator for the United States.

Multiple news outlets reported over the weekend that Kerry will be stepping down from his position as U.S. special presidential envoy for climate by the spring. According to Axios, the 80-year-old will turn his attention to helping President Joe Biden's reelection campaign.

A Catholic from Massachusetts whose career included stints as a U.S. senator, Democratic presidential nominee and secretary of state, Kerry has made climate change a central focus throughout his four-decade career in public service.

Kerry helped broker the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement and has been Biden's point person since day one to the international community on climate, tasked with rebuilding relationships and U.S. reputation on environmental matters in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency.

In that work, Kerry has viewed the pope as a global leader and important ally.



Pope Francis meets John Kerry, U.S. special presidential envoy for climate, at the Vatican May 15, 2021. (CNS/Vatican Media)

"The pope is one of the great voices of reason and compelling moral authority on the subject of the climate crisis," Kerry told Vatican News following a May 2021 private audience with Francis.

Kerry has called "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," Francis' 2015 encyclical on ecology, "a very, very powerful document" and "eloquent and morally very persuasive."

"[*Laudato Si*'] calls for a common response to the critical threat climate change poses to our common home. His plea for all religions to work together reflects the urgency of the challenge," Kerry said after its release, as secretary of state under President Barack Obama.

More recently, Kerry again praised the pope's "powerful words" in *Laudate Deum*, Francis' apostolic exhortation "on the climate crisis" issued in October. Kerry said,

"His Holiness should be heard by all when he writes we can only solve this crisis if we can 'count on the commitment of all.' "

"As a Catholic politician, Kerry has been a model for other Catholics in leadership in the spirit of *Laudato Si*' and *Laudate Deum*," said Servite Fr. John Pawlikowski, an emeritus professor at Catholic Theological Union and member of the climate action task force for the Parliament of the World's Religions.

Kerry has met personally several times with Francis, including twice as the country's first-ever climate envoy under Biden. After both meetings, he exalted the potentially game-changing presence the pope could bring to the issue at the annual United Nations climate conferences.

Following the May 2021 meeting, Kerry hinted that Francis might attend the COP26 summit in Glasgow, Scotland, where he could have "a profound impact" as nations sought to remain focused on climate change amid the COVID-19 pandemic and other global crises.

Related: Pope Francis joins world faith leaders in urgent climate appeal ahead of COP26

"We need everybody in this fight. All the leaders of the world need to come together and every country needs to do its part," Kerry told Vatican News at the time, adding, "I think his Holiness speaks with a moral authority that is quite separate. It's unique and we need all the power we can bring to the table."

Ultimately, the pope remained in Rome, sending multiple messages to Glasgow in his stead.

Two years later, Kerry left another meeting last June with Francis with renewed confidence the pope would attend the COP28 summit in Dubai. That was the plan until illness forced Francis to cancel the trip, what would have been the first for a pope in the nearly 30 years of the U.N. climate summits.

Speaking with NCR and other Vatican-based reporters, Kerry commended the Holy See for joining the Paris Agreement and U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change, saying the tiny city-state possesses "remarkable leverage" on climate

matters.

"He believes it very deeply," Kerry said of Francis. "He's very troubled by where we are and where we are not, where we should be."

A veteran of the Vietnam War and a Boston College graduate, Kerry served 28 years in the Senate (1984-2012) and was the Democratic nominee for president in 2004. During that campaign, he came under the spotlight after several U.S. bishops, including then-St. Louis Archbishop Raymond Burke, sought to deny him Communion over his stances on abortion.

Widely respected in the arena of international diplomacy, Kerry was in the middle of several major deals among nations to take more aggressive action on climate change.

As Obama's secretary of state from 2013 to 2017, he helped forge the Paris Agreement, where all nations for the first time agreed to take steps to cut their greenhouse gas emissions toward the goal of limiting average global temperature rise to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) and ideally 1.5 C (2.7 F).

Advertisement

Kerry at the Paris summit endorsed adding the 1.5 C target into the document, a major priority of island nations (one backed by the Holy See), which face losing their lands and culture to rising seas. When he signed the Paris accord for the U.S. in 2016, he did so with his 2-year-old granddaughter by his side.

Under Biden, he returned to lead U.S. international climate negotiations, forming a Catholic climate duo in the administration alongside fellow Massachusettsan Gina McCarthy, who led domestic efforts as national climate adviser for two years.

As climate envoy, Kerry's first task was rebuilding the U.S. reputation after Trump pulled the nation out of the Paris accord and worked to undo many environmental and climate-focused regulations. Kerry also amplified the nation's commitment to climate action through the more than $300 billion in climate spending in the Inflation

Reduction Act.

Kerry sought out greater investments from the private sector and worked to arrange several joint agreements between the U.S. and China — the world's top-two emitting countries — including ahead of COP28, where nations for the first time agreed to transition away from fossil fuels.



President Joe Biden and John Kerry, U.S. special presidential envoy for climate, attend an event on action and solidarity Nov. 1, 2021, at the U.N. Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland. (CNS/Kevin Lamarque, Pool via Reuters)

Still, Kerry faced criticism from countries and environmental groups skeptical of U.S. commitments or who viewed them as too little, as well as for the limited funds Congress has provided to developing countries for climate mitigation, adaptation and recovering from climate-related losses and damage.

Pawlikowski said Kerry's positive working relationship with his Chinese counterpart, Xie Zhenhua, "has been critical for the constructive, if limited, progress" on climate by nations, including at COP28.

Susan Hendershot, president of Interfaith Power & Light, told EarthBeat that Kerry "will be deeply missed" in his role as the country's chief climate negotiator.

"As a politician and a consummate diplomat, his commitment to finding solutions to the biggest existential crisis ever to face humanity has been inspiring," she said. "I have heard him speak of his deeply held values that have guided his thinking and his motivation. Mr. Kerry knows that climate change is not just an economic crisis or a political crisis, but a moral crisis that demands our attention and our action."

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 2-15, 2024** print issue under the headline: US climate envoy John Kerry, who called pope a ‘moral authority’ on climate, steps down.