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John Podesta, senior adviser to the president for Clean Energy Innovation and Implementation, speaks at the U.S. Center at the COP28 U.N. Climate Summit on Dec. 2 in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Podesta, who is Catholic, has been named to succeed John Kerry as President Joe Biden's senior adviser to the president for international climate policy. (AP/Joshua A. Bickel)



by Brian Roewe

NCR environment correspondent

View Author Profile

broewe@ncronline.org
Follow on Twitter at @brianroewe

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Three months ago, when three U.S. bishops and the leader of the country's largest organization for women religious were at the White House to discuss policies around pollution and climate change, one of the senior officials participating was a surprise: John Podesta.

During the mid-November meeting, Podesta — the longtime Democratic official and President Joe Biden's point person rolling out $300-plus billion in climate provisions and incentives within the Inflation Reduction Act — listened attentively to the Catholic contingent as they cited Pope Francis' new apostolic exhortation "on the climate crisis," *Laudate Deum,* in urging strong limits on pollutants from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The 45-minute encounter left Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, not only impressed by Podesta's grasp of climate and environmental matters, but with the Catholic politician's knowledge of church teaching on the subject.

"For him to take that much time I thought was very indicative of his care to hear what we had to say as religious leaders, and the subject in general," Wester told EarthBeat.

News broke this week that Podesta's climate duties in the Biden administration are expanding. He is set to succeed John Kerry as the country's lead climate negotiator in international deliberations. Kerry, who is also Catholic, is expected to step down as the first U.S. special envoy on climate by the spring, at which point Podesta will be named senior adviser to the president for international climate policy.

"I think he'll listen to faith leaders and moral arguments. So I'm encouraged to hear that news," Wester said of Podesta's new position.

The sentiment was echoed by Stephen Schneck, a Catholic political philosopher and board member for the Catholic Climate Covenant, who called the selection of Podesta "a great, great appointment by President Biden." Schneck taught for three decades at the Catholic University of America, and is currently a commissioner of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

"John is a serious Catholic" and supportive of Francis, Schneck said in an email.

"[Podesta] is committed to the vision of *Laudato Si*', and utterly gets the social justice core of our church's social magisterium," he said.

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Podesta's new role positions him as a central player in the annual United Nations climate summits. It's a place he's been before. While a counselor on energy and climate to former President Barack Obama, he was credited as a key contributor in developing the 2015 Paris Agreement, especially in helping forge an agreement with China in the lead-up.

Previously, he promoted environmental policies as President Bill Clinton's chief of staff, and later chaired Hillary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign. While in that position, he came under the spotlight after Wikileaks released scores of emails, including ones that referenced Catholics.

Outside presidential affairs, Podesta founded in 2003 the Center for American Progress, a progressive think tank based in Washington, D.C.

Podesta is expected to continue his current position as senior adviser to the president for clean energy innovation and implementation, where he oversees the billions in climate dollars allocated under the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act. How long he serves in both posts will likely depend in part on whether Biden wins reelection in November for a second term in office.

In their meeting at the White House, Wester, along with Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima, Washington, Bishop Edward Weisenburger of Tucson, Arizona, and St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, expressed their belief that the Catholic Church through its vast network can be helpful partners in raising awareness around climate change and

environmental justice, and perhaps even depoliticizing them.

"It's a pro-life issue. We have to take care of people and human lives as well as the rest of creation," the Santa Fe bishop said.

In naming Podesta to the important climate post, Biden, the nation's second Catholic president, again turned to a member of his faith, following Kerry and Gina McCarthy, who was national climate adviser for two years.

Asked about the shared faith ties, Wester said it was likely more coincidence, with their past records of success on environmental and climate policy weighing more heavily.

He added, "Hopefully it's part of the Francis effect. Who knows?"

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