News
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Members of the Catholic Youth Climate Summit leadership team pose for a photo with Cardinal Blase Cupich during the third annual gathering in Chicago, Feb. 25. (Courtesy of Catholic Climate Covenant)



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On an unseasonably warm and sunny February day in Chicago, about 100 high schoolers from Catholic schools across the archdiocese chose to spend their time gathered indoors for a summit on climate change and Catholicism. Joining them was Cardinal Blase Cupich, who spent the Sunday morning in conversation and prayer about what he called an "important issue."

The third annual Catholic Youth Climate Summit was held Feb. 25 at St. Ignatius College Prep and Church of the Holy Family in Chicago. Now a joint effort of the Archdiocese of Chicago and Catholic Climate Covenant's youth mobilization program, the gathering started as a partnership between the Archdiocese of Chicago and the neighboring Diocese of Joliet, Illinois.

Since that first iteration in 2022, both the number of students on the summit leadership team and the number of registered attendees have more than doubled, said Kayla Jacobs, youth mobilization program manager for Catholic Climate Covenant.

"Every year more and more students hear about it from their classmates who attended and want to get involved and every year the program grows," Jacobs told EarthBeat in an email.

Mass on the day of the summit — planned by the students and concelebrated by Cupich — began with a procession of the elements, among them cedar, tobacco, sweetgrass and sage, each "sacred to many peoples, including the Council of the Three Fires, the Potawatomi, Ottawa and Ojibwe, on whose homeland we now live and pray," read Alan Treto, a senior from Marist High School who was on the summit's leadership team.

Next, 14-year-old Aiyanna Mendez from the Arikara Ojibwe tribe led those gathered in the Prayer of the Four Directions, a native traditional prayer to open hearts and minds to all that is good.

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"Including the Indigenous into the ministry is fundamental," said Michael Terrien, director of the Chicago Archdiocese's care for creation ministry, because it is representative of "the wisdom that our Indigenous brothers and sisters can bring to what is needed in the world today."

In his homily, Cupich noted that from his time as the bishop of Rapid City, South Dakota, where he had relationships with several tribes in the diocese, he "feels at home" in a liturgical ceremony that includes the Prayer of the Four Directions. In fact, he said, his ordination Mass began with such a prayer.

He explained in his homily that the Feb. 25 Mass readings demonstrated God calling people into their particular leadership potential. And just as Jesus invited only certain disciples to ascend the mountain with him (Mark 9:2-10), those present at the youth summit were specifically invited to lead on important climate work today.

Yet while certain people are called to leadership roles, Cupich made it clear that environmental issues should be a concern for all Catholics.

"Today, no one can claim to be a faithful disciple of Jesus if they don't care about the environment," said the cardinal. "This is a deeply theological issue."



Students speak informally and pose for selfies with Cardinal Blase Cupich after a Q&A session with the cardinal during the third annual Catholic Youth Climate Summit in Chicago on Feb. 25. (Courtesy of Catholic Climate Covenant)

In a formal conversation following Mass, Cupich said young people hold a credibility that older generations lack because of how they have treated the planet, and that can help youth be effective leaders on this issue.

Mary Konstorum, one of 15 students representing 12 schools on the summit leadership team, said that type of accountability for harm done to the Earth by older generations was nice to hear. The senior from St. Ignatius College Prep said it added to feelings of empowerment for the difference her own generation can make in the future. Her peers on the leadership team agreed.

Students said another significant takeaway from their conversation with the cardinal was his focus on the connectedness of environmental justice with other issues of concern for Catholics. Cupich relayed an example of the relationship between

climate change and migration, and how the archdiocese was involved in addressing both with an awareness of how they impact each other.

"My hope would be that we're always looking at the interconnections," he said.

Konstorum told EarthBeat she appreciated the cardinal's focus on "intersectionality." Matt Harmon, a 17-year-old from Marist High School who was attending the summit for the first time, also noted the cardinal's emphasis on interconnectedness as something that struck him from the morning's discussion.

Overall, the fact that Cupich not only spent his Sunday morning at the summit, but also shared concrete examples of how he thinks about climate change and what the archdiocese is doing about it (like transitioning about 2,000 buildings to renewable energy) left students feeling like the church in Chicago is taking climate change seriously.

"They care," said Sarah Shefcik, a 15-year-old from Marist High School, to nods from her classmates around a lunch table, including Harmon and 16-year-old Olubukola Onimole.



Participants of the third annual Catholic Youth Climate Summit in Chicago gather for a photo with Cardinal Blase Cupich (center), Feb. 25 at St. Ignatius College Prep. (Courtesy of Catholic Climate Covenant)

Terrien stressed the summit, which is a part of the archdiocese's efforts under the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform initiative, isn't just about tangible outcomes, important as they may be. First and foremost, the summit is one piece of "a continual learning and development process. And it's all grounded in spiritual and ecological conversion," he said.

The students recognized that value in approaching climate work within a faith context, too.

Konstorum said that Catholicism "grounds the issues." And students of all ages and participation levels at the summit noted the existing sense of community that comes with engaging justice work within and through the church, saying there are already resources and a blueprint in place for how to be effective.

Those selected to join the summit leadership team meet every two weeks starting in the fall. Adult allies — including teachers, parents and ministers — who support their work meet monthly. Leadership team meetings include formation and education on topics such as ecospirituality, climate science, integral ecology and divestment, as well as planning for the summit.

Konstorum said that being on the leadership team has taught her how to organize an event and advocacy action.

"The goal of the summit, and the youth mobilization program in general, is to empower youth, create a space for youth leadership within the church, build community among youth in the region, and take climate action," Jacobs of Catholic Climate Covenant said.

The afternoon agenda at the daylong summit included sessions on "school sustainability" and "global effects of climate change," as well as "action planning/community organizing 101."

"Every student who attends the summit leaves with an action plan to take back to their communities and throughout the rest of the school year the students on the

leadership team follow up with the attendees on their action plans and provide assistance when needed," Jacobs said.

Additionally, members of the leadership team coordinated a virtual lobby day for March 18, when students in the Chicago area are encouraged to meet with members of Congress about their concerns regarding lead in water and the Enbridge Line 5 pipeline, an aging structure that carries 22 million gallons of crude oil and liquified natural gas daily through the Great Lakes.

The whole process is "truly a journey," Terrien said, that is "always moving towards the common good, and looking at how to practice our faith, and bringing Christ into the world. So it's a form of evangelization."

"This was led by the students and by the Holy Spirit."