Opinion
EarthBeat



Protesters gather for a fossil fuel and climate change protest outside Trump Tower in New York City on May 9, 2017. (CNS/Reuters/Brendan McDermid)



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As a lifelong Catholic, I was not used to worshiping like this — sitting with others in prolonged silence waiting for divine guidance to come from within. As a Catholic inspired by *Laudato Si'*, I was also not used to quiet worship as social action. There were no rallying speeches, no marches, no chants, no rituals, no inspirational messages. I was a Catholic among Quakers, worshiping in their way for our mutual goals. It was ecumenism at its most provocative gentleness.

Our parish, like many others, had taken on the challenges offered by *Laudato Si'*. So far, however, there had been just reading, reflection and discussion. Valuable as that is, given the urgency of the climate crisis, I longed for more action and well-planned, concrete steps taken in community with others. The Earth Quaker Action Team, EQAT, offered just that kind of dynamic, targeted option.



Members of the Earth Quaker Action Team and their supporters gather for a prayerful protest to urge Vanguard to stop investing in fossil fuels on Nov. 15. (Courtesy of Eleanor Harty)

EQAT and its non-Quaker supporters, including Catholics like me, had decided the best strategy for promoting climate justice in our area was to focus on Vanguard, a

major global investment institution near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, which had been designated the world's largest investor in fossil fuels. We had been writing, demonstrating and marching to expose and challenge these climate-devastating investments. We had been campaigning hard for customer divestment until Vanguard commits to environmentally responsible investing. Now we were trying silent worship to change hearts and minds.

Vanguard has invested about $270 billion in coal, oil and gas. Vanguard proclaims its commitment to investors' hope for a secure retirement, but Vanguard's fossil fuel investments are helping to foster extreme weather events and climate degradation and, as such, are actually financially risky in the long run.

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Moreover, in 2023, Vanguard supported only 2% of environmental and social shareholder resolutions. Once a year, all publicly traded companies' stockholders get to vote on resolutions about how the company is run. Asset managers like Vanguard vote on behalf of all their customers who have money invested in a certain company. Because so much money is invested through Vanguard's funds, it has enormous voting power at the annual meetings of almost all publicly traded companies. And because climate change poses such a profound risk to the whole economy, Vanguard had a fiduciary responsibility to its customers to hold the corporations driving climate change accountable to substantially reduce their emissions. It failed miserably in meeting that responsibility.

This failure followed the previous year's debacle when, after initially signing on, Vanguard backed out of its pledge to further climate justice by quitting the Net Zero Asset Managers initiative, a global network of asset managers committed to cutting carbon emissions set by the 2015 Paris Agreement as a pathway to a livable future.

In the spirit of Laudato Si' and EQAT, I decided to follow through further by taking a hard look at the environmental impact of my own investments (fortunately, none were with Vanguard), divest where needed and convince fellow parishioners and friends to do the same. It's rewarding in many ways: morally, but also, given the ever-increasing speed of nations converting to renewables, financially as well.

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My experience of Catholicism's unwavering commitment to social justice has always motivated me, but I had never heard much about focusing on the influence our money as well as our presence can have. For instance, since June of this year, EQAT's administrative and finance coordinator has tracked customer withdrawals of more than $24 million from Vanguard accounts and funds and expects this number will continue to grow as more customers choose to leave Vanguard because of its inaction on climate change.

Silent worship discomforted me at first because I do love recited prayers, rituals, movement, music and physically taking in the Eucharist — our form of nourishment and inspiration to go forth and do good in the world. Yet quiet worship in communion with others that day, all of us open to receive divine or spiritual guidance as we take on a major injustice, seemed different only in form, not in substance. We were all being nourished — and we were all taking concrete steps — to go forth and do good in and for the world.

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