News
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Local firefighters work to contain a wildfire after it was whipped up by high winds in Pampa, Texas, March 2, 2024. A new study released March 26 by Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate shows most Catholics in the U.S. believe environmental justice is an important issue, but only a third of them have heard of Pope Francis' encyclical on the topic. (OSV News/Leah Millis, Reuters)

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A new study shows most Catholics in the U.S. believe environmental justice is an important issue — but only a third of them have heard of Pope Francis' encyclical on the topic, with Mass attendance key to familiarity with church teaching on the care for creation.

"American Catholics' Views on Climate Justice" was released March 26 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, with data drawn from a December 2023 electronic national poll of 1,342 self-identified adult Catholics in the U.S.

Most of those interviewed (74%) prioritized church teaching on marriage over the environment (66%), followed by immigration (56%), abortion (53%), the death penalty (52%), birth control (48%) and euthanasia (47%).

While 72% believe that "environmental justice is a legitimate issue that needs urgent attention" and 62% are "concerned that climate change will harm them personally at some point" in life, only 33% of those interviewed knew of *Laudato Si'*, the 2015 encyclical Francis addressed to "every person living on this planet" to sound the alarm on "global environmental deterioration."

Jesuit Father Thomas P. Gaunt, CARA's executive director, told OSV News the study's findings are "not all that dissimilar" from other CARA investigations regarding the faithful's familiarity with Catholic teaching on other topics.

"It's fairly common that people are unaware," he said.

Gaunt pointed to CARA's September 2023 national survey of Eucharistic beliefs among US. adult Catholics, which showed that 51% of the nation's Catholics incorrectly believe the church teaches the Eucharist is a symbol, rather than the actual embodiment of Jesus Christ's real presence.

"There is substantial confusion about what the church teaches" regarding the Eucharist, noted that survey.

Gaunt told OSV News that same uncertainty about church teaching is present when Catholics are polled about other subjects, such as capital punishment or faithful citizenship.

"We have a large grouping of folks who are actually unaware (of church teaching) or (who are) actually holding (a belief) that is contrary, and are not aware that it's contrary," he said.

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Regarding the environment, the new CARA study found U.S. Catholics tend to hold the following general views on environmental justice, without specific reference to their religious beliefs:

— Close to one third (32%) have a broad sense of the issue, with almost another third (32%) familiar with the term but uncertain of its meaning; and 25% admitting they had never heard of it. Just 11% indicated they "know well" what environmental justice entails.

— One in five understood environmental justice as "equal access (for all people) to a healthy environment in which to live" (22% of U.S. Catholics) or as "fair and meaningful participation (of all people) in the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental regulations" (20%).

— Four in five (76%) believe that they have a moral responsibility to personally do what they can to combat climate change, as compared to 24% who do not believe that.

— Reducing waste or actively recycling top the list of environmental justice activities undertaken by U.S. Catholics (55%), followed by incorporating environmental justice into their decisions as consumers (18%) and donating to environmental justice-related causes (18%) among other activities.

— Yet among the 81% who engaged in at least one of the environmental justice-related activities in the past three months, two in five (44%) reported that they were

motivated "somewhat" or "very much" (as opposed to "not at all" or "only a little") by their Catholic beliefs.

In considering environmental justice within the context of their religious beliefs, over half of U.S. Catholics (54%) do not hold that "God has played a role in the changes observed to Earth's climate in recent years," while 46% agree God has been involved in that shift. A significant majority of Catholics in this regard (69%) believe that it is "important" or "very important" for Catholics to engage in environmental justice.

The CARA report also noted that U.S. Catholics' take on environmental justice differed significantly according to age and political party affiliation.

Young adult Catholics who reflected on the issue in terms of their faith were 13% more likely to believe that God was involved in observed climate changes, 12% more likely to have heard about *Laudato Si*', and 10% more likely to have seen the encyclical impacting their communities.

Among the study sample of U.S. Catholics, Republicans were more likely than Democrats to be skeptical of environmental concerns, whether considering the issue generally or in relation to their faith.

Broadly, Republicans were 32% less likely than Democrats to "agree strongly" that global temperatures are rising due to greenhouse gases, and 29% less likely than Democrats to "agree strongly" that concentrations of greenhouse gases are down to human activity.

In terms of faith and the environment, Republicans were 17% less likely than Democrats to "strongly agree" that Catholics are morally responsible for the environment, and 16% less likely to believe that it is "very important" for Catholics to engage in environmental justice.

But these political divides on the issue actually "start to mitigate" somewhat among weekly Mass attendees, Gaunt said.

"The political divisions are not that big a difference when we get to the regular Mass attenders," he said. "It's not as stark a difference that you might find elsewhere."

Those who are in the pews at least once a week are more likely to make an "explicit" connection between environmental justice and church teaching, he said.

According to the report, U.S. Catholic adults who attend Mass weekly or more often are 37% more likely to have encountered the topic of environmental justice in or through a Catholic setting (Mass, online or through Catholic media) in the past three months — and 37% more likely to have heard of *Laudato Si*'. In addition, regular Mass attendees in the U.S. are more likely to be very (16%) or generally (13%) familiar with the issue, with 12% more likely to believe the matter needs urgent attention.

Less active and affiliated Catholics tend to link faith and the environment somewhat more "intuitively," said Gaunt.

"They may not know about *Laudato Si*', but they'll know that the church has an interest or concern here," he said. "People will pick up (on church teaching about the environment) ... over the years, but they're not necessarily going to link it back to Pope Francis's letter."