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Bishop Edward Weisenburger of Tucson, Arizona, from left, Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico, Sr. Carol Zinn, Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima, Washington, and Lonnie Ellis at the White House, Nov. 17, 2023, for a meeting about climate change. (RNS/In Solidarity)

Archbishop John Wester

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May 24, 2024

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Three Catholic bishops and a nun walked into a climate policy meeting at the White House. This isn't the beginning of a joke. Bishop Edward Weisenburger of Tucson, Arizona, Bishop Joseph Tyson of Yakima, Washington, and St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and I really did go to the White House on Nov. 17, with support from communications specialist Lonnie Ellis. We went to discuss Pope Francis' latest apostolic exhortation on climate , *Laudate Deum*.

We went with a mission — a nonpartisan, faith-filled mission. Here's why.

We are all being impacted by worsening wildfires, heat waves and floods. We know that communities of color and the poor are being hit the hardest. Last fall, Francis issued a second impassioned call to answer the climate crisis. In *Laudate Deum*, he specifically mentioned the United States, pointing out that our emissions are "seven times greater than the average of the poorest countries." He encouraged individual and systemic conversion.

The pope's call spurred Catholic leaders to advocate to our government. Shortly after *Laudate Deum*'s release, we got the opportunity to speak with senior White House staff and to champion four policies supported by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to reduce four specific kinds of pollutants: soot pollution, methane, carbon pollution from power plants and emissions from heavy-duty vehicles.

With leadership from our domestic policy chair, Archbishop Borys Gudziak, the USCCB has advocated for stronger standards from the Environmental Protection Agency on each of these fronts.

Because pollution can enter deep into our lungs and bloodstream and lead to death, clean air and water are clear human life issues to us. Just as God tells us in the Bible to prioritize orphans, widows and other vulnerable people, so too our faith tells us to take action for those vulnerable to pollutants, wildfires and hurricanes. We also look to the future and our moral duty to leave our kids and grandkids a cleaner and safer

world.

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As the pope wrote in *Laudate Deum*, "Every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake."

Technology and human experience keep telling us that our planet is small and interconnected. I would argue that faith tells us something similar. Faith tells us that we are one human family living together in a common home. This common home belongs to God, as the Bible's Psalm 24 states: "The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds."

That is why Francis can boldly assert that polluting our air and water is "a sin against ourselves and a sin against God." We commit grave harm against ourselves through environmental destruction and we go against God's plan for us, which is to live in right relationship with one another and with God's creation.

We are told that Washington is broken and our country is so polarized that it's paralyzed. That is not what I see around me. People across the political spectrum worry about extreme weather and about chemicals that seem to be everywhere. I see people hoping to have clean air and clean water, regardless of their political persuasion. We all hope for a planet that is healthy for our kids and grandkids.

I am so grateful to see progress. In the six months since that White House meeting, the Environmental Protection Agency strengthened the standards on all four of those pollution sources. These measures will collectively reduce climate pollution by billions of tons and, by 2035, prevent more than 5,000 deaths per year, according to the EPA. Pollution doesn't care how you voted.

Care for our common home is moving beyond politics. These EPA actions may be read through a partisan lens for a while. But more and more, Americans are expecting cleaner energy and fewer toxins in our world. More and more people are joining Francis' "pilgrimage of reconciliation" with our environment. I pray that this growing, shared commitment will even lead to greater reconciliation with one another.

Read this next: Faith leaders call new EPA soot limit a win for vulnerable communities