Opinion
EarthBeat



People rally at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, Feb. 20, 2020, calling for the Jesuit-run school to fully divest from fossil fuels. In January 2021, the university announced it plans to phase out all investments in fossil fuels from its $587 million endowment within the next 10 years and target new investments in sustainable energy. (CNS/Courtesy of Emily Burke)



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In 2019, the Society of Jesus published four universal apostolic preferences (UAPs) to guide Jesuit institutions' work. This includes the 28 U.S. schools in the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU), which held its triennial Faith, Justice & Reconciliation Assembly at Loyola University Chicago July 16-19. To live the UAPs more faithfully, the association's Laudato Si' Commission, of which I am part, called each Jesuit school to make and fund science-based greenhouse gas reduction commitments.

This call presents the choice of whether to live Catholic mission more fully and embrace Jesuit identity more boldly, or not. It also raises questions of whether leaders are adequately formed to resist the "corporatization of higher education" and make these decisions informed by Catholic social teaching.

The four UAPs capture the Ignatian commitments to catalyze a "faith that does justice":

1. Showing the way to God: Show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment.
2. Walking with the excluded: Walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice.
3. Journeying with youth: Accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future.
4. Caring for our common home: Collaborate, with Gospel depth, for the protection and renewal of God's creation.

UAP 4, caring for our common home, involves Christian faith as science-based action. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines faith as the "adequate response" to God's love. In the Catholic tradition, this entails love through social justice that reforms institutions. Today, adequate responses to the climate crisis require that institutions make and fund science-based greenhouse gas reduction commitments.

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The Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies two criteria to have a greater than 50% chance to hold warming near 1.5 degrees Celsius — beyond which warming will likely accelerate and impacts become practically irreversible. We are likely out of time to hold warming at 1.5 C, but every 10th of a degree is a matter of life and death for people around the world, especially the poor.

First, we must cut greenhouse gas emissions in half from 2019 levels by 2030. Second, we must reach net-zero carbon by about 2050. Net-zero requires eliminating direct emissions by 90% before looking to offsets like tree planting.

UAP 4 impacts the "hope-filled future" of UAP 3. Jesuit Fr. Daniel Hendrickson, president of Creighton University, describes: "As a virtue, hope must be informed by other virtues, especially prudence as right reason applied to action. Faced with modern ecological degradation and the climate crisis, hope [like faith] requires action guided by the best available science."

If a Jesuit school isn't committed to prudent, science-based climate action, then as my Creighton colleague Richard Miller observes, it isn't committed to authentic Christian hope. This is especially notable since UAP 3 on hope calls Jesuit schools to "journey with youth" who experience tremendous anxiety about the climate crisis and prioritize climate change as the most important social issue.

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Furthermore, refusal to prioritize and pursue science-based greenhouse gas commitments is a social sin of omission — an institutional choice to not "adequately respond" to God's love. This refusal undermines the church's credibility among students who are already leaving the church.

As two Creighton University students wrote following their address to Pope Francis: "Young people value authenticity and deplore hypocrisy. We told Pope Francis that U.S. Catholic leaders' failure to share and enact the church's own climate teachings is causing many in our generation to become disillusioned with the church."

This double standard is especially notable to students when they consider secular institutions' commitments. More than 450 companies have signed The Climate Pledge to reach net-zero carbon by 2040 (10 years before the IPCC's 2050 target). In 2022, Creighton students sent a letter to university leaders that concluded, "*If profit-motivated corporations are prudently committed to net zero by 2040, our mission-motivated Jesuit, Catholic university should also commit to this goal*" (emphasis in original).

Francis wrote *Laudate Deum* because following *Laudato Si*', "responses have not been adequate," i.e., science-based. This implies faithlessness. And it applies to the AJCU.

Today, only eight of 28 AJCU schools have committed to net zero carbon through the United Nations' Race to Zero for Colleges and Universities: College of the Holy Cross, Gonzaga University, Loyola Marymount University, Loyola University Chicago, Loyola University Maryland, Santa Clara University, University of San Francisco and Xavier University. No other initiative identifies additional AJCU net zero commitments.



The Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities Laudato Si' Commission poses during the AJCU Assembly in Chicago July 18. The commission has called each Jesuit school to make and fund science-based greenhouse gas reduction commitments. Pictured, left to right, are: front row, Chris Bacon, Michael Schuck and Chad Raphael; middle row, Nancy Tuchman, Susan Margulis, Alice Kaswan, Tracy Harvey and Nicole Bouvier-Brown; back row, Brian Henning, Jesuit Br. Mark Mackey, Dan DiLeo, Jennifer Eagleton and Tom Ryan. (Courtesy of Shot Time Productions)

In response, the Laudato Si' Commission recommends that every AJCU school:

- Commit to cutting a university's direct Scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas emissions in half from 2019 levels by 2030 and reaching net zero carbon by mid-century, ideally 2030 at the latest.
- Include among their top priorities fundraising for climate emission reduction initiatives and investments supporting a just transition that incorporates climate justice for all.

- Set and achieve increasingly ambitious climate mitigation goals, that also address Scope 3 emissions (e.g., travel, food systems), and use science-based GHG (greenhouse gas) accounting to track/share progress.

These commitments will require AJCU leaders — senior administrators and trustees — to apply Catholic social teaching and pursue the Vatican's Laudato Si' Action Platform goal of "Ecological Economics." Notably, 26 AJCU schools have committed to the platform.

Catholic social teaching and ecological economics make decisions based on more than assessments of financial risk and returns on investment. This narrow approach is what many call the "corporatization of higher education." Instead, as Pope Benedict XVI explained, Catholic social teaching and ecological economics consider finances alongside the social and environmental costs of not acting.

Additionally, leaders will likely need to prioritize fundraising to enact science-based greenhouse gas reductions. This may require sacrifices of nonacademic aspirations. In his book Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education, theologian Gerald Beyer describes the higher education luxury " 'arms race' that uses noneducational amenities" to recruit students. Leaders would do well to remember that sacrifice is at the heart of Christianity and luxurious excess is a vice.

To apply Catholic social teaching and ecological economics, leaders must be formed in the theological ethics of Catholic mission. Catholic theology is an academic discipline and mission cannot be spiritualized or collapsed into phrases emptied of their objective, normative and often countercultural moral standards.

For example, in his homily at the AJCU Assembly concluding Mass, Jesuit Fr. Brian Paulson, president of the Jesuit Conference of Canada and the United States, reiterated more than 130 years of official church teaching that free-market liberalism is inconsistent with Catholic social teaching which grounds the mission of Catholic, Jesuit institutions.

However, Beyer writes:

> The Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has explicitly acknowledged this leadership problem: "The majority of our lay people

> come without adequate formation or interest in learning about and implementing the mission beyond humanistic concerns, like 'care of the person' or a 'commitment to service.' In the absence of a 'thick' understanding of the tradition, these good and well-intentioned leaders will be uncertain about how to hire faculty and administrators who explicitly engage the university's mission and establish and promote programming that links directly to our Jesuit, Catholic identity."

At the AJCU Assembly, one attendee recounted how a woman religious responded to a university trustee who asked why a Catholic school would pay more for a sustainable building: "If you have to ask why, you might be at the wrong school." At minimum, that trustee needed additional mission formation.

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If Jesuit schools are to avoid corporatization and make mission- and science-based greenhouse gas reduction commitments, they will likely have to require substantive formation in Catholic social teaching for senior administrators and trustees. Since the U.S. bishops emphasize that "Catholic social teaching is a central and essential element of our faith," this required formation should already be standard practice.

Out of deep love for the church and the Society of Jesus, I pray that Jesuit schools will equip their leaders for adequate responses to the AJCU Commission calls and commit to science-based greenhouse gas reductions.