Opinion
NCR Voices



From left, Interior Secretary Doug Burgum, Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lee Zeldin pose for a selfie with the Trans-Alaska oil pipeline in the background after a news conference at Pump Station 1 on June 2, 2025, near Deadhorse, Alaska. (AP/Jenny Kane)



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In recent months, Catholic leaders — including the leadership of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops — have become increasingly vocal about the injustice of the Trump administration's immigration policies. According to one recent study, Catholic priests have discussed immigration with their congregations at a rate only slightly eclipsed by abortion.

Across the United States, some bishops have been taking to the streets, marching to raise awareness and protest the Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids. Other bishops and faith leaders have been showing up in court to stand in solidarity with and advocate on behalf of those detained.

These and other statements, actions and forms of advocacy are to be praised and emulated. At a time when some of the most vulnerable members of our society are being targeted and dehumanized, detained and deported, vilified and scapegoated, it is reassuring to see Christian leaders heed the scriptural imperative to welcome the stranger and embrace the church's teaching on the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable.

Where there has been less public outcry and response from faith leaders, especially within the Catholic community, has been around the Trump administration's disastrous environmental policies and actions. Earlier this spring, NCR published an editorial titled "We must oppose Trump's immoral environmental agenda," which correctly exhorts Christians to oppose the current federal efforts to dismantle the safeguards, policies, systems and professionals that are in place to protect the environment and all creatures that share our common home.

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While the editorial rightly names the Trump administration's agenda as immoral, it falls short of using the explicit language of "ecological sin," which is what I believe the administration's actions should be called.

Some people will immediately resist the use of sin language to describe transgressions against the more-than-human world, but this is part of church tradition. Take, for example, the definition of ecological sin outlined in the final document of the 2019 Synod of Bishops on the pan-Amazon region:

> We propose to define ecological sin as an action or omission against God, against one's neighbor, the community and the environment. It is sin against future generations, and it is committed in acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment. These are transgressions against the principles of interdependence, and they destroy networks of solidarity among creatures and violate the virtue of justice.

This is by no means the first time the concept of ecological sin has appeared in church teaching.

Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," quoted the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who said in a 1997 speech in Santa Barbara, California:

> It follows that to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation, for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands, for humans to injure other humans with disease, for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air and its life with poisonous substances — these are sins.

Francis adds this definition of ecological sin to the moral teaching of the church through the exercise of his ordinary magisterium in *Laudato Si*'. So, to borrow a phrase from the eucharistic prayer, it is "right and just" to call what is happening today a form of ecological sin.




The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's sign is seen on the podium at EPA headquarters in Washington July 11, 2018. (OSV News/Reuters/Ting Shen)

One of the most egregious instances of ecological sin is the ongoing dismantling of the Environmental Protection Agency. Just last week, The New York Times reported that the EPA announced that "it would eliminate its scientific research arm and begin firing hundreds of chemists, biologists, toxicologists and other scientists, after denying for months that it intended to do so," the Times said.

As the report notes, the EPA's "science office provides the independent research that underpins nearly all of the agency's policies and regulations."

The administration officials responsible for these kinds of decisions are not shy about their interest in deregulation in service of chemical manufacturers and other industries that have long complained about the environmental protection laws and policies.

Earlier this year, Lee Zeldin, the EPA administrator, boasted about rolling back or eliminating dozens of environmental regulations. Among the areas targeted by

Zeldin and other officials have been policies regulating carbon emissions and other efforts to respond to anthropogenic climate change.

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Relatedly, earlier this month, The New York Times reported that the Energy Department had hired three scientists who are known for rejecting the scientific consensus on climate change. The Times also reported that the Trump administration dismissed hundreds of scientists and other experts who were working on an important federal scientific report on the state of climate change, essentially shutting down the research project altogether.

Climate denialism, policies and actions that contribute to environmental degradation, pathways for individuals and corporations to pollute with impunity — all of these are forms of ecological sin. They not only harm the nonhuman world, but they will likely have devastating consequences for millions of humans, too, including the most vulnerable and historically disenfranchised in our communities.

The kind of ecological sin the Trump administration is perpetuating is not only that of omission, the willful failure to do something that is right and just, but it is also a form of commission or active harm. The language of sin is important here because, as people of faith, we are compelled by our baptismal vocation to live the Gospel, to "turn away from sin," and to repent for what we have done and what we have failed to do.

These sorts of actions are not merely about politics or differences in ideology, they are morally significant and demand an examination of conscience, contrition and penance. For this reason, all people of faith, but especially our church leaders, ought to be explicit about calling out this sin for what it is: a willful transgression against God, neighbor, and all of creation.