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New Jersey priest: Climate change message must be preached at parish levels

by Sharon Abercrombie

Eco Catholic

When was the last time you heard a homily addressing the seriousness of climate change? Perhaps this question needs rephrasing: How often have you heard a homily addressing the seriousness of climate change?

Fr. Paul Mayer of East Orange, N.J., a longtime social and environmental activist, wouldn't be surprised if the majority of responses come down to "rarely" or "never." And this worries him. In a telephone interview Jan. 22, Mayer made a strong plea for faith communities to begin building a major movement that elevates climate change above its current "footnote" status and places it squarely in the center of both spiritual and public concerns. The pulpit could be an effective beginning point, he said.

Within the Catholic church, climate change deserves "the same emphasis as abortion and birth control," he said. "But when I talk to young people, they tell me those topics are all they hear about in sermons, and they're bored."

"Climate change," Mayer said, "is the moral issue of our time."

Mayer praises Pope Benedict XVI and socially conscious bishops for their statements and pastoral letters on the environment, but he wonders why their ideas aren't getting down to the diocesan and parish levels.

He said it is crucial for people in the pews to join ecologically minded groups and become part of a large populist movement. This could effectively counteract the environmental gridlock among the D.C. lobbyists, Congress and "the fossil fuel pharaohs."

While he was "pleasantly surprised" by President Barack Obama's inaugural remarks on climate change, Mayer said he believes Obama will need help from a large press of religious communities and social activists -- the same groups responsible for adding leverage to the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements.

"We have to keep his feet to the fire," Mayer said.

Besides pushing the president, "we have to connect climate change to people's self-interest -- the green jobs that will be created by sustainable energy projects," he continued.

But issues of self-interest go much further than jobs -- they touch people's hearts and spirits, he said. Think about the amount of stress, grief, worry, fear and depression that will surface when individuals begin experiencing the effects of climate change in their personal lives. Who will be there to minister to them, to comfort them? Mayer wonders.

Mayer, 81, is a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and was a Benedictine monk for 18 years. He served as a coordinator of the Catonsville Nine Defense Committee in support of the Berrigan brothers and has been involved in peace, social justice and environmental issues, including work in the barrios of Central America, the civil rights movement in the South, and reconciliation work in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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"I've always been for the underdog," he said.

A longtime friend and student of the late environmentalist Fr. Thomas Berry, Mayer said he experienced an epiphany in 2003.

"I woke up in the middle of the night and realized, 'My God, global warming is the biggest issue facing humanity today,' " he said.

When he realized the extent to which the planet has become the lucrative underdog exploited by the coal, gas nuclear and natural gas industries, Mayer enlisted the help of an environmental cohort, Ted Glick of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network. Together, they founded the Climate Crisis Coalition to create public awareness, and in 2011, the group joined forces with a newly formed organization, the Interfaith Moral Action on Climate.

On Jan. 15, Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, the latter sponsored "A Pray-In for the Climate" at the White House. More than 150 people braved the winter weather to take part. Among their demands, the protesters asked Obama to refuse permits for the Keystone XL pipeline, a carbon fee and an end to fossil fuel subsidies, with diversion of those subsidies going into the development of clean energy sources and job creation.

NASA climate scientist James Hansen led the procession from New York Avenue Presbyterian Church down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House, carrying a large papier-mâché planet. Mayer couldn't be there; he came down with flu at the last minute, but said he was pleased by reports of the day.

Mayer said police and onlookers seemed interested in what speakers had to say. Eighteen people were prepared to do civil disobedience by blocking two entrances to the White House, but nothing happened. They weren't arrested. Mayer said he thought Obama, the police and the Secret Service did not want to

have embarrassing anti-environmental egg on their collective face so close to the inauguration and on Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, to boot.

Since the pray-in, Mayer's Climate Crisis Coalition has launched a campaign asking religious communities to divest themselves of their investments in fossil fuels.

Mayer's push to bring the climate change crisis to a religious community and populist level has support from a Harvard political scientist, an environmental activist and an evangelical clergyman.

In a research paper she will present next month, Theda Skocpol of Harvard University says "climate change warriors will have to look beyond elite maneuvers and find ways to address the values and interests of tens and millions of U.S. citizens." Skocpol accuses the Washington, D.C.-based environmental groups of political malpractice, saying they were blind to extreme Republican opposition to their efforts and that she believes there is little prospect Obama will put climate change at the top of his agenda in his second term.

Bill McKibben, environmental writer and founder of 350.org, writes on Grist that a grassroots movement has revived enough to push the center-left swell in the direction it must go.

The Rev. Richard Cizik, an evangelical Christian clergyman who heads the progressive New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, was interviewed on a local Fox affiliate last week on the pray-in. He told the interviewer he believes more churchgoers will accept the truth of climate change if their pastors would preach about it from the pulpit.

For further information about Fr. Paul Mayer and his environmental work, go to The Huffington Post, where he is a frequent contributing writer. Mayer is the founder of a spiritual peace community in East Orange, teaches yoga to seniors and has an active wedding ministry as a non-canonical, formerly married priest.

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