



*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

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The Kripke Center

Supplement 9 (2013)

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## The Greening of the Papacy

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and John J. O'Keefe

### From the Pope to the Pew

#### Is Papal Teaching on the Environment a Factor in Moving Parishes to Action?

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#### Introduction

For this volume, we were asked to share our experience building a Catholic constituency for environmental justice, particularly on the issue of climate change. Because this paper concerns itself with practice and experience, it will be of a different form than other papers in the collection. Nevertheless, we hope our experience adds a layer of complexity by sharing anecdotal evidence to the important analysis and nuance described elsewhere in this collection.

By way of background, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change (hereafter the CCCC or the Coalition) was begun in the summer of 2006 as a way to assist the United States Catholic community become more fully aware of and active on the U.S. bishops' statement

on climate change: “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good” (2001).

CCCC is a partnership of a dozen national Catholic organizations including the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Relief Services, the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, and many others. The Coalition strives to be a network of networks: encouraging each of the partners to integrate education about and action on a Catholic approach to the issue of climate change in ways that make sense to their organizational goals, structures, and constituents. In this way, the Coalition has a much further reach than trying to do all of this activity on its own with its limited staff. The Coalition’s fiscal sponsor is the National Religious Partnership for the Environment.

In 2009, the Coalition launched its current and primary organizing tool, the “Catholic Climate Covenant: The St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor” as a way to encourage greater personal and shared engagement by the Catholic community to respond to the impacts of climate change. The initiative offers Catholics a concrete way to live out their faith by linking care for God’s creation and climate impacts on the poor and vulnerable at home and abroad. Catholic individuals, families, parishes, schools, and institutions are encouraged to join the Catholic Climate Covenant by taking the St. Francis Pledge and registering their commitment online at <http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/the-st-francis-pledge>. The pledge asks Catholic individuals and groups to PRAY and reflect on the duty to care for God’s Creation and protect the poor and vulnerable; to LEARN about and educate others on the causes and moral dimensions of climate change; to ASSESS how we as individuals and in our families, parishes and other affiliations-contribute to climate change by our own energy use, consumption, waste, etc.; to ACT to change our choices and behaviors to reduce the ways we contribute to climate change; and to ADVOCATE for Catholic principles and priorities in climate change discussions and decisions, especially as they impact those who are poor and vulnerable. To date, over 7,000 pledges have been registered on the Coalition’s website.

Drawing on the experience of the Coalition’s network and nearly six years of educating and organizing the Catholic community around the issue of climate change, we hope to offer a few insights about the difficulty of this task. Additionally, we seek to share that we are ever hopeful that our consistent efforts are laying the groundwork for what is surely and unfortunately to be a more recognizable and increasingly urgent problem for humanity and for the planet.

To plumb the question of whether or not Church teaching on the environment emanating from the Vatican is moving parishes to action, we have both mined some existing data and generated some of our own. In addition, we will compare – albeit briefly and incompletely – parish level action on the environment with parish level action on another sometimes contentious issue: immigration.

At the outset, we will state that engagement in these or other complex moral issues at the local parish is uneven at best. In rural parishes, the faithful would likely be much more concerned about food and farm issues, whereas urban or suburban parishes would focus little on these issues. In parishes serving “border” communities in the south, immigration issues would be high on their list to the exclusion or diminishment of other pressing moral

questions. On the environment, parishes suffering from the impacts of environmental degradation such as those near power plants, Superfund cleanup sites, or in areas that experience frequent weather extremes such as “tornado ally” or Southeastern coastal communities prone to hurricane damage, would pay much more attention to environmental degradation and climate change than others far from such threats.

We also acknowledge that there are whole dioceses or specific parishes within dioceses that are far more engaged in a broad array of social justice issues, including climate change, than others. We believe it is fair to say that places of deep engagement are the exception, not the rule. The key to parish or diocesan engagement is history, leadership, or a combination of both.

### **Data Analysis**

To begin to get at this question of whether or not papal teaching on the environment encourages action at the parish level, we will first look at a March 2009 Coalition-commissioned survey conducted by Zogby International. The survey was designed to test some of the key messages, themes, and suggested actions the Coalition wished to include as part of the launch of the “Catholic Climate Covenant: The St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor.” While it is a few years old, we believe that for our purposes many of the conclusions still hold. However, we will acknowledge that the intensity of opinions has waxed or waned over the past three years. For the purposes of this paper, the results of this survey help us understand how fertile the ground is for the efforts to educate and organize U.S. Catholics around the issue of climate change.

In March 2009, Zogby surveyed 1,000 Catholics and found that most Catholics indeed see climate change as a problem (55%) and believe that humans are the primary cause (59%). In addition, the majority believes it is urgent that we address climate change (58%). When asked if they believe that climate change will negatively impact themselves and their families now and in the future, 42% responded “yes.” Asking the same question but substituting U.S. poor and global poor for family, the percentages increase: 52% for U.S. poor and 60% for global poor. Asked if they believe climate change will impact future generations, 66% answered affirmatively.

In testing Catholic teaching on the environment and climate change, participants were asked what might persuade them to act. Large majorities believe that action to address climate change: shows respect for creation (76%); makes the world safer for future generations (67%); is consistent with our obligation to protect the poor (64%); and helps those with fewest resources withstand climate change impacts (66%).

When asked about their familiarity with church teaching on the environment in general or climate change in particular, less than a third knew that the Pope has spoken out about the environment, slightly more had heard about the environment from their pastor, but less than one in five knew about the U.S. bishops’ statements. Not surprisingly, Catholics who are regular Mass attendees have a much greater awareness.

The poll also revealed that by huge margins, Catholics have or would be willing to do the five activities outlined in the St. Francis Pledge project: to pray, learn, assess, act, and advocate. This base of support is stronger than we expected and ought to provide a solid

foundation upon which the Coalition can continue to expand the movement to re-integrate Catholic teaching about care for creation.

Next, we looked at a poll conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life from 2007. The Pew's poll numbers were lower in terms of Catholics who say that anthropogenic climate change is real (52%), but were still better than the more politically conservative group of white Evangelicals (37%). Furthermore, in 2010, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 85% of Catholics favor "tougher environmental rules and regulations" as opposed to 78% of Protestants. Like the Zogby poll, both Pew polls (2007 and 2010) found that religion plays less of a role in shaping Catholic opinions than does scientific education or the media.

Finally, we looked at *Contemporary Catholic Trends* (CCT) from 2005 and found that many are consistent with the newer findings regarding Catholics' concern for the environment (Le Moyne College). Compared to the Coalition's poll from 2009, CCT also revealed that the number of Catholics aware of official church teaching on the environment more than doubled between 2005 and 2009 (14% to 33%).

In summary, we believe that some broad statements can be made about this polling data:

- While Catholics do largely understand environmental concerns, they have a somewhat vague awareness that the Pope has spoken out on the environment and climate change and are even less aware of the U.S. bishops' position.
- At the same time, it appears that they can be persuaded to greater action.
- What will likely be needed (as suggested by our own informal data collection, see below) is real leadership by the pastor or the permission of the pastor for a well-respected parishioner to offer strong leadership.
- Overall, messages from the media and interaction within our complex culture have more to do with Catholic action on environmental concerns including climate change than does the Vatican, bishops, or pastors.

### **Immigration Comparison**

Unfortunately, we found less data about Catholic attitudes on immigration than we did on climate change. The USCCB conducted a poll in 2008, again, through the Zogby organization. But the questions were primarily about public policy and less about Catholic teaching. Nonetheless, we did discover a few things that may be helpful.

The poll indicates that three-fourths of U.S. Catholics do believe that the Church is morally obligated to help immigrants, regardless of their legal status. But less than half believe that it is okay for immigrants to come to the U.S. to find work so that they will be better able to provide for their family.

In the aforementioned 2010 Pew survey, attitudes about Catholics and immigrants closely mirror the general population, but with obvious and significant differences between white and Hispanic people. When asked if they prefer better border security, 37% of white

Catholics say “yes” compared to 8% of Hispanic Catholics. Not surprisingly, parishes with higher levels of immigrant parishioners find the support for greater security drop to around 22%.

When participants were asked if they prefer a path to citizenship, 16% of white Catholics said they would support such policies while 42% of Hispanic Catholics would agree. Combining both tighter border security and a path to citizenship, white Catholics support registers at 44%, Hispanic Catholics at 47%.

In comparing the two issues, again, we should not be surprised to see that while Catholic teaching has made some inroads into what Catholics might think about both issues, it is also true that the secular media has far more influence on Catholic attitudes toward both immigration and climate change than Vatican or U.S. bishops’ teaching. In other words, culture trumps religion.

However, polling data does provide some hope that a clearer formulation of Catholic teaching on both issues will likely result in greater support for immigration and climate change policy as well as stronger commitments to personal action on both issues. The challenge for the Church will be to continue to find ways to be heard above the din of everyday American life, particularly through the media.

### **Survey of Those Who have Taken the Pledge**

In February 2012, we sent a survey (Appendix A) to the Coalition’s roughly 6,000 *Weekly Update* subscribers. Included in this database are 32 U.S. parishes that have taken the St. Francis Pledge. The survey was intended to search for answers to a number of questions and to discern not only what parishes are doing, but also the motivations for their actions. We received 34 responses, and while we acknowledge that this survey tool is highly unscientific – especially since this is a very self-selected group (pledge takers) and not representative of the average Catholic parish – we nevertheless think that this is a helpful measure through which we might draw out some enlightening anecdotal evidence relevant to our research question.

When we asked survey participants to list the primary parish activities that help advance environmental stewardship we found that 8 in 10 recycled, six in 10 replaced lights with energy efficient bulbs, or installed motion-sensitive switches. Forty-four percent did some type of adult education; 34% planted trees or banned styrofoam; 28% upgraded HVAC systems or replaced windows; 2 in 10 offered compact florescent bulbs to their parishioners; and 1 in 10 said they utilized bulletin inserts describing Catholic teaching and parish activities.

Participants were asked to identify the key motivating factors for their activities and were asked to “check all that apply.” Seventy-two percent said that an individual parishioner drives most of their activity. 47% and 44%, respectively, say that the teachings of the Pope and the bishops motivate their work. Likewise, environmentalists or environmental messages motivate 44% of parishes. Saving money came in at 31% followed by the example set by another faith group (neighboring church, for example), 25%. Sixteen percent cite leadership by the pastor, deacon, or other parish minister.

When asked, “How familiar are you or the personnel listed about Papal teaching on the environment (particularly from Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI)?” respondents listed in order of familiarity: themselves, the parish ecology committee (if one existed), followed by parishioners and the pastor. Most say that this awareness of papal teaching is a key motivator for their ongoing work. When we asked, “How familiar are you or the personnel listed about bishops’ teaching on the environment” we found similar responses to the awareness of papal teaching, but overall slightly less awareness than that of the recent popes.

An important goal for the Coalition has been to urge Catholics (individuals, students, parishes, organizations) to go beyond being green and integrate Church teaching on the environment into their activities. To understand the connections between “green” activities and how these activities demonstrate both a respect for God’s creation and their impact on the poor at home and abroad, we asked: “What activities do you do that help make these links between the environment and Catholic social teaching?” Happily for us, 53 percent encouraged parishioners to take the St. Francis Pledge. Thirty-eight percent said the pastor preached on the environment and celebrated Earth Day. Slightly fewer, 34%, celebrated the Feast of St. Francis. Bulletins and adult education were utilized far less frequently with only 9% using these means. Both linking parish efforts with school activities and using the *JustMatters* module came in at 6%.

## Conclusion

So in the end, what can we say for sure about whether the Pope’s teaching on the environment is filtering down to the pews?

We think there is very little hard evidence that the Pope’s teaching has an impact on parish activities. But there does appear to be some correlation between this teaching and what action does exist at the parish level. For those parishes that are already engaged, the Pope’s teaching has some impact; however, we think it is safe to say that this impact seems more a matter of affirming activities already in progress rather than the inspiration for beginning something. We believe that there is far more influence from the culture than from the Church when it comes to acting on the environment at the parish level. We believe it much more likely that once such activities get underway, Church teaching serves as a way to bolster the case for activity rather than initially drive the activity itself.

On the other hand, Covenant materials have twice been sent to approximately 17,000 U.S. parishes in the past two years and only 32 parishes have taken the time to sign and register their St. Francis Pledge commitment on our website. In light of this, one can draw the conclusion that there is very little traction in the country to explicitly connect papal exhortations to care for creation with parish activities.

That said, in our experience reaching out to Catholics in a variety of settings (from keynoting national Catholic gatherings to offering workshops in parish halls), most Catholics are surprised and appreciative when we have shared the teaching of Benedict XVI. There is usually a small minority that is resistant to our message and continues to hold to their position of denial or skepticism regarding Church concern over environmental degradation and climate change.

We think it is fair to say that like most social justice issues – from the social safety net to immigration and from the death penalty to climate change – it is unfortunately the exceptional parish that is collectively and actively engaged. It is far more likely that there are a few individuals within the parish, some with a pastors' support and many without, who are seen as the leaders on any of these issues. We also believe that these exceptional and active parishes depend much on the support and active leadership of the pastor, deacon or other respected member of the parish staff.

What does all this mean for moving Catholics to action?

For its part, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change will continue to develop our partnerships with national Catholic organizations to find ways for them to integrate climate change teaching and activities into their programs in ways that make sense to their constituents. We will find creative and novel ways to highlight Church teaching on the environment more broadly and climate change in particular. We believe that such a strategy is paying dividends but recognize that more is clearly needed.

However, based on the experience of the Coalition in widening and deepening Catholic engagement on the issue of climate change for the past six years, we can say a few things with a fair degree of certainty:

- It may be that until it becomes painfully obvious that the world – and the United States in particular – is in deep trouble with the climate, our society in general – including our fellow Catholics – will not likely reflect on how their individual and collective actions are a significant source of the problem of climate change.
- Leadership at all levels is vital to moving Catholics to embrace an ethic of self-reflection and restraint. We need to hear even more from the Pope about this. A synod on the environment, sustainability, or caring for creation, for example, would have a huge impact just as the documents of Vatican II transformed the Church. We also need to hear more bishops and more pastors speaking out about this issue.
- The U.S. Catholic community needs to hear from or form associations of Catholic climate scientists, educators, deacons, religious orders, and others on this issue.
- Linking climate change more clearly to the pro-life movement expands the notion of pro-life to include the critical problem of how future generations (as well as “innocent life”) might fare in a climate-compromised world. This is not only about the burning of fossil fuels – the primary driver of climate change – but the current-day byproducts of this activity. These include mercury and other toxins from our power plants, ozone from our cars and trucks, and particle pollution from many sources, all of which have dramatically compromised the health of the most vulnerable persons, including the pre-born, young children and the elderly. The Church has explicitly recognized that these, too, are life issues (see Groppe; USCCB: 2011 and 1991; Benedict).
- New religious language and religious images are needed to help Catholics retrieve ancient traditions about how to be better stewards of creation, live more simple and sustainable lives, and pry open our hearts, minds and bodies to the needs of both creation and poor people.

- There is a need to better integrate environmental messages and themes into our liturgical life so all may more easily make the connection between matter and spirit, and come to appreciate that they are dependent upon one another.
- Grassroots leadership is needed as well. For its part, the Coalition is pouring time and resources into developing programs and projects that engage young people. They are the future of the Church and will certainly see the impacts of climate change more clearly than older generations.

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## Appendix

The following poll was e-mailed by Dan Misleh in February 2012 to contacts in parishes who have registered their parishes as having taken the St. Francis Pledge to care for Creation and the Poor.

*From the Pope to the Pew: Is Catholic Teaching on the Environment a Factor in Moving Parishes to Action?*

I have been asked to present a paper at a conference, “The Greening of the Papacy,” at Creighton University next month. Dan DiLeo, Project Manager for the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, will co-author this paper.

As part of our research, we are collecting anecdotal evidence on parish efforts and exploring connections between these efforts and Catholic teaching. We would like to ask you a number of questions to help us better understand both what you are doing and your primary motivations. Your answers will be kept anonymous.

Thank you for taking the time to help us with this project.

\* Required

1. Full Name \*

(for follow-up contact only, if necessary)

2. Parish \*

(for follow-up contact only, if necessary)

3. (Arch) Diocese \*

(for follow-up contact only, if necessary)

4. Phone Number \*

(for follow-up contact only, if necessary)

5. E-mail address \*

(for follow-up contact only, if necessary)

6. Please list the primary activities in which your parish is engaged that help advance environmental stewardship (check all that apply): \*

- Recycling
- Energy conservation (light bulbs, motion-sensitive switches)
- Adult education on care for creation
- Promoting the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor
- Capital campaigns to upgrade parish energy systems or other “big ticket” projects such as window replacement
- Tree planting
- Partnering with secular environmental groups for community environmental projects

- Distributing efficient light bulbs to parishioners
- Eliminating Styrofoam from parish activities
- Other:

7. Is there a group (a parish ecology committee, for example) that organizes parish activity around environmental concerns? \*

- Yes
- No
- Don't know
- Other:

8. What would you say are the key motivating factors for this activity (check all that apply)? \*

Individual parishioners with interest and motivation

- Local efforts, such as another church or school, have inspired our parish, school, or organization to do more
- A plea from your pastor, deacon or other parish minister
- Awareness of Papal teaching on the environment
- Awareness of bishops' teaching (either your own or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) on the environment
- Secular "green movement"
- Desire to save the parish money
- Other:

9. How informed would you say that parishioners are about your practical efforts? \*

- Very informed
- Somewhat informed
- Not at all informed
- Don't know
- Other:

10. How familiar are you or the personnel listed about Papal teaching on the environment (particularly from Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI)? \*

	Very	Somewhat	Not at All	Don't Know
You				
Your parish ecology committee (if applicable)				
Your pastor				
Fellow parishioners				

11. How familiar are you or the personnel listed about bishops' teaching on the environment (either your own or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)? \*

	Very	Somewhat	Not at All	Don't Know
You				
Your parish ecology committee (if applicable)				
Your pastor				
Fellow parishioners				

12. Do you (or your committee) work to explicitly link the parish's practical efforts to Catholic teaching on environmental stewardship? \*

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

13. If you answered "Yes" to question 12, what specific efforts have you or your ecology committee made to link the parish's practical efforts to Catholic teaching on environmental stewardship (check all that apply):

- Taken the St. Francis Pledge as a parish
- Encouraged parishioners to take the St. Francis Pledge
- Pastor has highlighted environmental awareness in his homily at least once in the past year
- Parish or pastor highlights Church teaching on the environment on the Feast of St. Francis, Earth Day or other days
- Used the JustMatters module on Care for Creation or a similar program in adult education
- Other:

14. To what extent would you say that your parish's environmental efforts are inspired and animated by Papal teaching on the environment (particularly from Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI)? \*

- Strongly inspired by Papal teaching
- Somewhat inspired by Papal teaching
- Not at all inspired by Papal teaching
- Don't know

15. To what extent would you say that your parish's environmental efforts are inspired and animated by bishops' teaching on the environment (either your own or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)? \*

- Strongly inspired by bishops' teaching
- Somewhat inspired by bishops' teaching
- Not at all inspired by bishops' teaching
- Don't know

16. When thinking about immigration – another important moral issue of concern to the Catholic Church – would you say parishioners are more aware or less aware of Catholic teaching on this issue than the issue of environmental stewardship? \*

- More aware of Catholic teaching on immigration
- Less aware of Catholic teaching on immigration
- About the same amount of awareness of Catholic teaching on the environment and immigration
- Don't know