

# Green New Deal reframes climate issues

The so-called Green New Deal, particularly because of its lead congressional sponsor, is controversial and polarizing, but the broad vision it articulates for environmental justice appears to be compatible with the Catholic social teaching principle of caring for God's creation.

Without commenting on specific policy proposals or the politics of the document's progressive Democratic sponsors, Catholic theologians, environmentalists and ecologists told *Our Sunday Visitor* that the Green New Deal is a welcome "reframing" of the issues pertaining to climate change.

"It is at least a step in the right direction for politicians to place before American citizens a reflection on the way that human beings, Americans in particular, have lived, and the way the consequences have impacted the environment," said Joseph Capizzi, a professor of moral theology and ethics at The Catholic University of America.

## Four years since '*Laudato Si*'

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* ("On Care for Our Common Home") was released in June 2015. The encyclical "calls on all people to consider the deep and intertwined relationship with God, our brothers and sisters, and the gifts that our Creator has provided for our stewardship," said Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz, then-president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a 2015 news release. Pope Francis wrote that care for all things of the earth is bound with the care of one another.

Capizzi told OSV that Catholics cannot afford to ignore how human beings impact the earth. He referenced Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si*, that emphasized how God designed creation in a way that challenges people to

respond to him and their neighbor in justice.

“We as human beings, as part of that creation, have a special responsibility as co-creators with God to care for creation, to make sure whatever we do with it ultimately serves God out of concern for justice toward the rest of creation and justice toward ourselves,” Capizzi said.

Jose Aguto, the associate director of the Catholic Climate Covenant, a nonprofit that presents a Catholic voice in the national climate change discussion, told OSV that the Green New Deal already has sparked some substantive discussion. He noted that Republican lawmakers in Congress recently have been presenting their own ideas to address global warming through energy innovation.

“We are now beginning to have a bipartisan discussion,” Aguto said. “If we were to divorce the fact that (the Green New Deal) comes from the Democratic Party, we would find logical parallels with what’s found in *Laudato Si.*”

## **Green resolution**

On Feb. 7, U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, the driving force behind the Green New Deal, introduced the document in the U.S. House of Representatives, while U.S. Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts introduced a companion resolution in the Senate.

The Green New Deal, which is not an actual bill but a nonbinding resolution, presents an overarching picture of how the U.S. could tackle climate change over the next decade. The proposal envisions a major government role in phasing out fossil fuels in the move toward an economy based on 100% renewable energy sources.

The document also calls for substantial government investments in creating high-paying jobs and overhauling the nation’s infrastructure while protecting vulnerable communities.

The resolution itself does not propose any new government regulations, but its association with Ocasio-Cortez – a freshman congresswoman and a self-described Democratic-socialist who has become a political lightning rod – makes the Green New Deal a somewhat sensitive topic to engage.

“When you have hardcore progressive Democrats pushing this issue, it’s immediately going to turn off lots of people who need to listen, because those voices are also championing partial-birth abortion, same-sex marriage and all these other issues that are antithetical to the Christian faith,” said William Patenaude, who blogs and writes about ecology from a Catholic perspective.

However, the Democrats’ positions on life and family issues does not mean they are wrong on climate change and environmental protection, Patenaude, who is also an engineer with the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, told OSV.

The overwhelming international scientific consensus is that human activity, particularly through fossil fuel emissions, is warming the planet and changing the earth’s climate. Last October, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report that concluded the world needs to reach net-zero emissions of carbon dioxide by 2050 in order to avoid serious climate change impacts such as rising sea levels, extreme weather and environmental degradation.

“Switching away from fossil fuels is a critical piece of the puzzle,” Patenaude said. “There is an economic benefit in transitioning to renewable energy, but it has to be done in a way that is fair and beneficial to workers who rely on the fossil fuel industry to feed their families.”

Patenaude said, “The United States has always benefited from being innovators, so why are we afraid to do this now? The question is how does government, hand in hand as partners with

the private sector, make this happen in a way that's beneficial to all?"

## Environmental care

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis pulls no punches in how human beings, especially since the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, have harmed and exploited the planet's environment in the reckless pursuit of profit and comfort, often at the expense of poor communities in developing nations.

"Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last 200 years," said Pope Francis, who also wrote that technology based on fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas "needs to be progressively replaced without delay."

"The Green New Deal and *Laudato Si* try to (address) the need to move away from fossil fuels," said Rebecca Eastman, an advocacy coordinator for the Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach, a U.S.-based initiative of the Missionary Society of St. Columban.

Eastman told OSV that the Columban missionary priests and laity who live and work in poor communities around the world have seen firsthand how climate change disproportionately impacts them. Those communities often lack the resources to respond to rising sea levels that destroy homes and warmer temperatures that devastate local agriculture.

The Green New Deal "is a vision document. It's not prescriptive in policy," Eastman said. "It operates at a broader level, but I think that is what was needed as a first step because climate change as an issue impacts so many parts of our lives that solutions to it are going to be integrated with many other areas."

Concrete policy solutions will be needed for issues that *Laudato Si* and the Green New Deal touch on, such as the need for a "just transition" to a renewable energy economy that

protects workers, the right of people to have clean air and water, healthy food and a sustainable environment, and the importance of protecting communities that bear the brunt of pollution and climate change's effects.

*Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.*