

## ANOTHER VIEW

# Let's heed Pope Francis' message on climate change



By The Rev. Dr. Mary E. Westfall

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Like many Americans, I was inspired by Pope Francis's visit to the United States. When he met with President Obama at the White House, he said loud and clear to our president and the nation: "Climate change is a problem that can no longer be left to a future generation." Pope Francis has made clear that for the sake of all God's creation, he will actively use his position of authority to help the upcoming international climate negotiations in Paris to be as effective as possible. That is why he timed the release of his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, in June. Being effective in Paris means we must be ready to cut greenhouse gas emissions at home, and there is much, much work to do!

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Pope Francis specifically told President Obama in front of our nation, "I find it encouraging that you are proposing an initiative for reducing air pollution." In fact, the Obama Administration has already outlined multiple goals to cut fossil fuel emissions. In January, the administration announced a goal of reducing methane emissions by 40-45 percent by 2025. Methane is a highly potent greenhouse gas that accounts for about one fourth of climate change. Right now, a proposed rule out of the Environmental Protection Agency to curb methane emissions from oil and gas sources is open for comment. Methane is the primary component of natural gas, and currently, it is industry standard among oil and gas extraction companies to allow large amounts of methane to vent into the air.

Like Pope Francis, I share a deep concern for the ways climate change will distort God's creation and make the one and only common home we share, planet Earth, a more dangerous place for all of us. Climate change is happening now, and our actions right now can abate it or accelerate it. The choice is ours. Methane in particular is a greenhouse gas that accelerates climate change. It traps more than 80 times as much heat on our planet over a 20 year period than carbon dioxide does.

I also share Pope Francis's direct observation that he made in his encyclical: that due to human negligence, our common home is starting to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In the spirit of Pope Francis, let's not mince words. Pollution is filthy, and our nation's current levels of methane pollution are comparable to a giant invisible oil spill every day. Methane emissions create ozone smog, and further away, lots of fine particle pollution.

This contributes to pollution of our lungs and bodies, leading to coughing, wheezing, asthma attacks, and even cancer. We do not even know what it does to the rest of God's creatures who share the air.

Furthermore, like Pope Francis, I am against an economy of exclusion and attitudes of indifference. Allowing the current level of methane pollution to persist is bad stewardship of a finite fossil fuel resource. As Christians, we believe all of creation is a gift from God, and that our role is to be caretakers of creation, stewarding and sharing justly all of God's gifts. The current level of waste is unacceptable. We all know that when finite resources run low, people living in poverty are the first to suffer and go without. The nature of a finite resource is that it will run out. The annual quantity of leaked methane from oil and gas industry sources could heat more than six million homes each winter. (To fully understand how absurd this situation is, keep in mind there are about 5 million homes in Ohio.) Until we have achieved the transition to cleaner energy strategies to power our homes, we need to carefully steward our methane resources.

Lastly, I share Pope Francis's deep hope that God has given humanity the ingenuity, the desire to live in right relationship in our communities, and the will to solve problems of climate change and pollution. In Madison Square Garden on Saturday, Pope Francis cast a vision for us rooted in Isaiah 9:1: "The people who walk, breathe and live in the midst of smog have seen a great light; have experienced a breath of fresh air!" May it be so.

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