



Divine Mercy Sunday Second Sunday of Easter April 23, 2017 A

Everyone's Backyard (An interview on climate change)

This weekend, Earth Day is celebrated throughout the world at least by people who believe that climate change is an issue that should concern all of us. In his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*, *On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis made climate change a moral issue. His predecessors, St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI, also sought to get the world's attention on this issue. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis frequently quotes his two predecessors.

In looking for something to write on this topic, I came upon an interview of Sylvia Hood Washington by the editors of U.S. Catholic magazine. Sylvia strongly believes with Pope Francis that climate change is a moral issue. [Below is a short background of Sylvia followed by the full text of the interview.]

Sylvia Hood Washington didn't set out to be an advocate for climate justice. "I don't want to be on this mission," she says. "My kids are out of college and graduate school and it would be so easy to sit back and plan a vacation to Hawaii." But her personal experience with climate change and her feeling of responsibility to her community, her family, and her faith made it impossible to turn away from the need she saw around her.

Concern and accountability run in the family. Washington learned about caring for the earth and for local communities at the feet of her mother, who was a community activist even before environmentalism was a formal movement. She organized the first park in Washington's childhood neighborhood in Cleveland, and she fought for the predominantly African American area to have the same kind of recreational services and greenery as the wealthier neighborhoods.

Washington says, "My parents had this real deep understanding of environmental integrity, and they felt that they were not getting it." Years later, it would be this same environmental mindset and community activism she learned from her mother that spurred her into the environmental justice movement.

While Washington started her career as an environmental engineer working at institutions like

NASA, today her work for climate justice has led her in unexpected directions. Her environmental justice accomplishments include working with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) on a documentary project about African American Catholics and environmental health and, more recently, traveling to the Paris United Nations Climate Change Conference.

Why is concern for the environment a justice issue?

Our way of living is costing human beings their lives. It is causing cancer, miscarriages, and a degradation of living. And, because it is the people with fewer resources who live in poorer communities who are most likely to be affected, environmental degradation and climate change impact a disparate number of people of a particular color. There are communities all around the world who have an unequal interaction with the environment.

People once thought we could put waste somewhere else—in someone else's backyard—and it wouldn't bother anyone, at least not anyone important. But, it's all God's creation, and it's all tied together. When someone puts chemicals in the water in one place, it doesn't stay there; it goes into the ground and through the aquifers, it evaporates and comes back as precipitation.

The first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970. Many African Americans criticized the movement at the time, saying it was an attempt to distract people from the unrest that was created by the other major social movements that were going on—things like women's rights, African American rights, and the anti-war movement. And here you have this environmental movement, which is not focused on human beings, but instead on things like planting trees.

The result was that many newly elected black leaders—from Carl B. Stokes to a young Jesse Jackson, Jr.—went to the Capitol, saying, "Do not let this new environmental movement deflect from the public health situations in African American communities, most, if not all, of which are environmentally created."

This is where the environmental justice movement came from. It was grounded in a call for public health equity. Today environmental justice continues to make

people pay attention to the fact that our modes of production are actually costing people their health and their long-term stability as human beings.

What's an example of environmental injustice?

It's hard to overcome growing up in a situation where exposure to lead or other pollution is common. Imagine living in those kinds of corrupted communities, exposed to pollution and chemicals, with no safe place to send your kids outside to play. These are also the communities subject to violence. How can you be a true parent, a true family?

The same thing goes for lead exposure. Lead, whether due to lead paint or old water pipes that leach lead into the water source, tends to be present in older, less well-maintained buildings in poorer areas of the city. When a child grows up in a house like this and is exposed to lead, it's not just a danger for that child. Lead is lipophilic, which means it stays in the body's fatty tissue. Say, a girl is exposed to lead as a child. Even if she grows up and leaves that environment, when she gets pregnant her child is exposed to lead. Guess what—if that child is also a girl, the same thing happens for another generation.

This cycle goes on and on, until there's a way of actually taking the lead and other heavy metals out of the body. But how many of these people can afford to have that medical procedure? How many of these people are even aware this is a problem?

Our environmental behavior and our willingness to pollute our planet have totally corrupted people's existence as living beings for generations. That's horrifying. Every living creature deserves a safe ecosystem, and yet we're failing to provide that for human beings.

That's the injustice. That need to care for creation on such a deep level needs to be articulated by Catholics around the world.

Is climate justice a Catholic problem?

As an environmental scientist and as an environmental justice scholar, I wholeheartedly agree with Pope Francis and his call to make climate justice an issue for the whole church. People have been protesting about whether climate change exists and the science in the document, but his recent encyclical *Laudato Si'* is not about climate change. *Laudato Si'* is about environmental justice.

In the encyclical, Pope Francis talks about how everyone thinks that technology is progress and that industrialization is always moving us forward. He says we have to stop and talk about the downside to technological advancement.

People of color understand that. They have borne the cost of technological production. We've borne it with the polluted land and waters. And the encyclical is the first really widespread document that talks about it.

In our society, we treat those suffering because of climate change like throwaway people.

St. Francis was the same way before his conversion. He was a playboy, earning good money—he said he could not stand the sight of a leper. But at one point he suddenly sees Christ in the face of a leper, has a conversion experience, and starts ministering to the man.

If we follow St. Francis and live the gospel life, then we don't put these modern-day lepers into some colony outside the city where we don't have to interact with them, or even see them. Everyone is a child of God, and Christ is in everyone: all of the people who have been exposed to HIV/AIDS, all the people who are violent, who suffer with endocrine disrupters, who have asthma. All the people who shovel coal for a living or whom we see as the "other." Jesus calls us to embrace the leper. We can go even further and make sure that what is creating the leprosy is no longer a problem.

When I talk to Catholics—regardless of color—about climate justice, environmental justice, and the right-to-life perspective, they get it. They understand. Catholics have always been involved in environmental movements. It's part of our pro-life mission.

How is climate justice a pro-life issue?

As Catholics, we know that all forms of life are sacred. St. Francis tells us that all life gives praise to God. Everything living is blessed by our creator, is of value, and must be saved. Everything. You don't get to choose between a fetus and a tree. We're supposed to choose all of it.

How did you get involved in climate justice?

My mother was a victim of climate change. It was in Cleveland in 1988, and she was 56 years old.

She was happy; my father had passed away three years prior, but my family was bouncing back. My mother was laughing again, talking. She loved her house, but she started having strokes every six months, and she couldn't live by herself anymore. So she started living with different kids every couple months.

She went to stay with one of my relatives that September and it was extremely hot. She started feeling sick, but this time it wasn't another stroke. She just said, "I feel overheated." So we took her to the hospital to figure out what was wrong. She was fine. I went to visit her, we picked out really cute pajamas and a book for

her together. We were laughing. But the next thing I knew she was in a coma.

We found out later that she'd had a heart attack while in the hospital. Since my mother also had diabetes, she had developed a condition like neuropathy; it actually killed the ends of her nerves, so she couldn't feel anything at all. She had a heart attack and probably didn't even know it because all her nerve endings were dead. She couldn't even cry out.

After my mother died, at first I didn't make any connections between her death and climate change. I knew about pollution, of course—I'd seen cities dumping waste in poor neighborhoods. But I was working at NASA doing environmental modeling, so this was not something that was on my radar at all.

Years later, in 1995, there was another heat wave in Chicago. Almost 800 people died; many of them were African American men of a certain age. I also had a miscarriage that year. It was so hot, and our air conditioning went out. I started thinking about the connections between temperature and human health, especially in these high-risk populations.

That's when I created the group People of Color for Climate Change. I never thought I would be involved in climate change, but there it was, right in front of my face. It was something that affected me personally.

I use social media to reach out to people, and I created a climate and justice conference in Chicago. I bring the information to laypeople. I didn't want to do it or see myself doing it, but I'm called to it, and I will do what I can to make sure my mission is accomplished.

Catholics are not supposed to just go to church and sit there doing rosaries and adorations. That's not what our faith is all about. We're called to mission. That's what's scarier, because it's hard to leave our comfort zone. But that's what Pope Francis is saying.

Is there hope?

I believe in miracles. I believe that we are never given too much to bear. That's my core faith belief. If we don't have the solution, it's not because a solution doesn't exist; it just hasn't been revealed to us yet.

God gave Noah the knowledge and the wisdom to build the ark to save creation. He told him the flood was coming, and he told him how to deal with it. We're in a similar situation now with climate change. God has given us the wisdom to figure out how to deal with it so that we don't destroy ourselves.

I am a scientist and an engineer who worked for NASA, and I don't think climate change is a tall tale someone is spinning. The data is there. Ninety-seven percent of all scientists polled agree that climate change is real and that it's exacerbated by human action. That

knowledge is given to us by God. But God also gave us knowledge on how to deal with climate change.

I believe that Pope Francis is not spinning his wheels. He's a scientist, and he has spent many hours discussing climate change with other scientists. I don't think the pope would have written *Laudato Si'* if he did not believe, as a leader of our church, in climate change and the dangers to all of humanity.

What can we do to help?

We need to embrace the truth that we have limited resources. We now live on a planet that has been compromised for everyone, rich and poor, black and white.

Then we have to absorb the fact that if we don't change our ways, we will destroy the planet for the next generation and the generation after that. Within 100 years there may be very few people who can survive this planet above ground.

That is the hard truth we have to live with. We're American, so we've always been on top, and we've always had a certain number of resources and way of living. We haven't had to think about how those resources get distributed or if there's enough for everyone. So the fact that we have to change our ways is going to be a very difficult thing to grasp.

It is not easy to change. When I became a mother, it was a very difficult transition for me. I went from being single to married for 10 years, and all of a sudden I had a child. My husband kept telling me, "Oh, you'll adjust." That's easy for him to say! But you have to make these changes and know that's part of your faith.

When people are diagnosed with a disease, it's devastating because they have to suddenly change how they live. Take heavy smokers who are diagnosed with lung cancer, for example. Some people can accept the facts and make the change to quit smoking. Other people can't accept the truth, so they keep living the way they've been living, and they eventually die from their disease. This doesn't just affect the person who's sick; they bring everybody who loves them down with them. Except in the case of climate change, it's not going to be our immediate family who's affected if we don't accept it and act on it: It's going to be communities and countries and islands that are submerged—that are already submerged.

When we see the massive flooding and islands going under water on television, we have to know that our consumption patterns are tied to that. That's hard. But we can't stick our heads in the sand and ignore what's going on. We have to be educated. We have to have homilies by our pastors. We have to have religious education that talks about these issues. I'm in

a small Bible study group that's reading a little bit of Laudato Si' every week and talking about it. More Catholics should be doing this in their churches and in their families.

Don't purposely stay ignorant and don't cling to someone because they're telling you that you don't have to change your way of life. We need to listen to what Pope Francis is asking us to do. He's saying to educate yourselves, accept the truth, and act on that truth.

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Reflection questions

1. What spoke to you most in the article?
2. What parts of the article did you disagree with?
3. Do you know of a Catholic author with a different opinion on the issue?

A Prayer for Our Earth

By Pope Francis

All powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures. You embrace with your tenderness all that exists. Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty. Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one. O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not prey on it, that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction. Touch the hearts of those who look only for gain at the expense of the poor and the earth. Teach us to discover the worth of each thing, to be filled with awe and contemplation, to recognize that we are profoundly united with every creature as we journey toward your infinite light. We thank you for being with us each day. Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.

Have a blessed week,

