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President Joe Biden delivers his first prime-time address from the White House on March 11, 2021, marking one year since the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic and the first anniversary of widespread shutdowns to stop the spread of the virus. (CNS/Reuters/Tom Brenner)



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Catholic sisters and congregational representatives advocating at the United Nations and elsewhere as well as sisters involved in on-the-ground ministries give U.S. President Joe Biden generally high marks for his first 100 days in office, saying that his administration is tackling dire challenges requiring immediate attention that were ignored or even shunned during the Trump administration, such as climate change.

However, the sisters say the Biden administration has a problem with immigration-related issues, particularly developments at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Holy Cross Sr. Verónica Fajardo, a counselor at Holy Cross Ministries in Salt Lake City, Utah, where she works with clients facing deportation, said the president is off to a good start, given the considerable challenges he faces. But Fajardo said while she is pleased by Biden's efforts against racism and by the immigration reform he has proposed, she wishes the humanitarian crisis at the southern border could change faster.

"But it's so layered, there's so many different levels, it's going to take time," Fajardo said.

The sisters say the Biden administration overall is grappling with issues that they champion and credit the president himself for an open and level-headed tone.

"President Biden has gotten off to a good and ambitious start," said Maryknoll Sr. Marvie Misolas, representative of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns at the United Nations. "He is offering a presence of hope and honesty."

"The world is in a bad space, and President Biden is dealing with a lot of challenges, both external and internal," said Sr. Winifred Doherty, who represents the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd.

She praised the president in particular for his "compassionate response" to the problems of racism and police shootings in the United States as well as his "very welcome" way of engaging with the international community.

Sr. Ann Scholz, a School Sister of Notre Dame and the associate director for social mission for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, emphasized the "positive atmosphere" that came with the new administration.

LCWR's stated priorities for 2019-2022 focus on the intersection of racism, migration and the climate crisis, and in those areas, Scholz said, "we're generally pleased with much of what the administration has begun."





From left: Sr. Marvie Misolas, representative of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns at the U.N.; Sr. Winifred Doherty, U.N. representative of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; Beth Blissman, U.N. representative for the Loretto Community (GSR file photos)

'Big, pernicious issues that need addressing'

While the sisters say they welcome the Biden administration's reversal on several Trump-era policies, they also realize that the administration cannot immediately address all of the issues that are important to them.

Misolas gives Biden high marks for his quick attention to the climate crisis and the global pandemic as well as for steps to close the gap on economic inequities.

"I'm looking at it as 'coming-back leadership,' " Misolas said, given that the Trump administration downplayed the climate crisis, dropped out of the Paris climate accord and, in the midst of the pandemic, left the World Health Organization.

However, Misolas said she would like to see a firmer stance on nuclear disarmament and more attention to racial justice matters. For Beth Blissman, a lay representative for the Loretto Community at the United Nations, that means tackling some of the deeper, structural problems linking climate and the economy.

"He's come in and ripped out some leaves," Blissman said. "But there are some really big, pernicious issues that need addressing."

While praising Biden's recent climate summit (which included participation from Pope Francis), quick attention to the pandemic and the prominent role women play in the administration, Blissman said the climate crisis deserves even more attention than it has gotten.

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"As a species, we're on a precipice," she said. "We're at a climate crisis because of how we view economics."

That includes a dependence on corporate-run agriculture and fossil fuels, she added. "We need to green our economy from the bottom up."

Doherty agreed and, like Blissman, wondered if the targets Biden set for cutting greenhouse emissions, while ambitious, go far enough.

"He's struck the right tone on climate," Doherty said, "but we need bold leadership, not incremental leadership."

Sr. Teresa Kotturan, who represents the Sisters of Charity Federation at the United Nations, said she feels Biden is "leading in the right direction." In a short amount of time, he has dealt with the climate crisis "with urgency and international collaboration," she said.

The promotion of international cooperation on the climate crisis has been "gigantic," she said.

Kotturan said she recognizes that there are obvious political limits to what a president can do, particularly with a narrow margin of support in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Still, she said she thinks Biden can be effective partly because of his understated leadership style, which is in contrast to his predecessor's.

"He's not in your face every day," Kotturan said.

Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, the justice coordinator for the Sisters of the Holy Cross and former U.N. representative for Franciscans International, said the successful passage of the American Rescue Plan, which could cut the rate of child poverty in the United States by half, is a "phenomenal" accomplishment.

"It's not important that I am Catholic and he's Catholic," she said. What is important, she said, is that Biden is committed to helping reduce poverty in the country and globally. "That's how you build Catholic social teaching."





From left: Sr. Teresa Kotturan, U.N. representative for the Sisters of Charity Federation (GSR file photo); Franciscan Sr. Florence Deacon, justice coordinator for the Sisters of the Holy Cross (Courtesy of Florence Deacon); Sr. Tracey Horan, Sister

of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, and assistant director of education and advocacy for the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona (Courtesy of Tracey Horan)

A mixed start on immigration

During the 2020 presidential campaign, Biden promised to substantially raise the number of refugees who have been approved and vetted for legal entry into the United States from the cap of 15,000 set by the Trump administration.

When the administration recently announced the numbers would stay the same, at least initially, critics condemned the move, and the administration backtracked. New cap numbers are expected to be announced later this month.

Deacon said it will take time to bring those numbers up because Trump administration policies made deep cuts into the country's refugee resettlement infrastructure, though she said those problems are now Biden's.

"The administration will have to get a handle on immigration," she said.

Sisters who minister along the U.S.-Mexico border say the start of the new administration has been a mix of celebrations and frustrations.

With Biden ending the Migrant Protection Protocols, migrants and refugees who had set up camp in Mexico were finally able to cross into the United States to process their asylum cases after months or years of waiting in limbo.

Still, activists said they are disappointed that the administration is continuing Title 42, a public health order from March 2020 allowing the U.S. Customs and Border Protection to expel migrants to prevent the coronavirus from spreading in holding facilities.

Sr. Tracey Horan, a Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Indiana, and assistant director of education and advocacy for the Kino Border Initiative in Nogales, Arizona, regularly speaks with migrants who are confused as to why their right to asylum is still being denied.

"They'll say, 'We understand that change can't be immediate, but they knew that these issues existed coming in,' '' she said of her conversations with migrants.



Asylum-seeking migrant families in La Joya, Texas, wait to be transported by Border Patrol after crossing the Rio Grande from Mexico April 27, 2021. (CNS/Reuters/Go Nakamura)

"There's that sense that the responses coming from the Biden administration are not matching up to the violence, the real dangers and the urgency that people here feel, which is very disappointing for us."

Though Horan said she appreciates the open channels of communication she has experienced with the new administration, "the openness is not translating into concrete action, which is very frustrating," she said.

For example, Biden campaigned on supporting community-based solutions for offering hospitality to migrants but then signed a contract with a chain of hotels "instead of investing in the community groups that have been doing this work for years," Horan said.

Still, Horan said the continuation of rapid expulsions under Title 42 is her biggest frustration, as she considers it "a very clear step" that the Biden administration has the power to take but has chosen not to.

"I continue to feel that tension between sparks of hope and disappointment," she said.

"To me, it's a reminder that the underlying issues that we're seeing have started decades ago with prevention through deterrence and that what we really needed is to stop relying on executive actions to do the work of Congress. ... It underlines that point for us that there is this need for broader immigration reform, and we need to get serious about pressuring people in decision-making roles to make that happen," Horan said.

In his first address to Congress on April 28, two days before his 100th day in office, Biden spoke broadly about immigration and urged Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

"Immigration has always been essential to America. Let's end our exhausting war over immigration," Biden said. "For more than 30 years, politicians have talked about immigration reform, and we've done nothing about it. It's time to fix it."

At the same time, Biden stressed the importance of addressing root causes.

"We also have to get at the root of the problem of why people are fleeing, particularly to our southern border from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador. The violence. The corruption. The gangs. The political instability. Hunger. Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Natural disasters."

Though LCWR's Scholz said the administration is "interested in ensuring justice for immigrants, I think they're finding it is proving much more difficult than anticipated."

She echoed Horan's desire for an end to Title 42, adding that the job of the faith-based community is to continue to lift these issues and challenge the administration when necessary.

But she said she is happy to see that the president named the climate crisis a national security issue, centering the issue in both foreign and domestic policy by immediately re-entering the Paris Agreement and pursuing environmentally sound infrastructure through the American Jobs Plan.

And by supporting the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, as well as the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, Scholz said Biden is essentially "making the right moves."

But the key question is whether or not the legislation can get passed.

"Probably the biggest challenge is: How much can you do without congressional action?" she asked, underscoring that bipartisanship outcomes are the ideal.

"I don't see how he's going to move his agenda effectively through the Senate. ... It's a long slog."



President Joe Biden, left, applauds a man receiving the COVID-19 vaccine April 6, 2021, at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

[Dan Stockman, Global Sisters Report's national correspondent, also contributed to this report.]