Blog




A strong contingent of faith-based groups calling for an end to dependence on fossil fuels gathered prior to a major climate march that drew tens of thousands in midtown Manhattan Sept. 17. Representatives of sister congregations at the United Nations spoke to GSR about Pope Francis' new climate apostolic exhortation. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)



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## Join the Conversation

October 11, 2023

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Pope Francis' new climate apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* has given representatives of sister congregations at the United Nations much to think about — and to praise.

Several representatives lauded the Oct. 4 letter for its affirmation of advocacy, noting that at one point the pontiff recognized that "many groups and organizations within civil society help to compensate for the shortcomings of the international community, its lack of coordination in complex situations, and its lack of attention to fundamental human rights."

Though the pope was speaking about advocacy on climate-related topics, the representatives said the pope's support has implications for a wide range of efforts and that it is important for them to continue their work at the United Nations and elsewhere.

"I think what we see from Pope Francis in this apostolic exhortation, is that it is crucial for us to be there [at the U.N.]," said Blair Nelsen, the lay representative at the United Nations for the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace and the executive director of the New Jersey-based ecospiritual nonprofit Waterspirit.

On a related subject, the representatives acknowledged that the United Nations' own assessment of its ambitious 17 sustainable development goals is sobering.



Pope Francis listens during an ecumenical prayer vigil before the assembly of the Synod of Bishops in St. Peter's Square Sept. 30 at the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)

In an interview a few days prior to the recent two-day (Sept. 18-19) SDG summit at United Nations headquarters in New York, as well as a Sept. 17 climate march and a one-day U.N. "Climate Ambition" summit, four congregational representatives used words like "bleak," "very bleak," "terrible" and "awful" to describe the state of progress for achieving the ambitious global efforts to promote gender equality and try to end, or at least reduce, social ills like poverty and hunger by the year 2030.

Yet while expressing frustration both about the lack of progress on the sustainable development goals and the lack of access civil society groups had at the U.N. summit, the representatives said this is not the time to give up on either the SDGs or the U.N. — though they added that events like the climate march are perhaps more energizing for advocates now than large-scale United Nations events like the SDG summit.

They all see larger dynamics at work.

"When other people can't see the hope, I think we envision an interconnected world," said Beth Blissman, a lay representative for the Loretto Community. "And because of our grounding in faith, we can see and model then that better world, that world we really want. I think it's the superpower of hope." She added: "There's a real need and hope for new worldviews, paradigms and levels of thinking."

What follows are edited excerpts of a joint interview and follow-up emails with Blissman and Nelsen and Sacred Heart of Mary Sr. Veronica Brand, who represents her congregation at the United Nations, and Winifred Doherty, the U.N. representative of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd.

***GSR*: What is your reaction to the pope's new letter and what it implies for advocacy work like yours?**

*Doherty*: A portion of one paragraph caught my eye, in which the pope speaks of "multilateralism 'from below.' " He said: "Unless citizens control political power — national, regional and municipal — it will not be possible to control damage to the environment." In other words, the pope is asking, "What would it look like if we were promoting multilateralism 'from below' "?

I feel that this calls us as religious women with a strong presence at the national, regional and municipal levels to engage in much more intentionally with activists to support one another pressuring the sources of power.




Sr. Winifred Doherty, the main U.N. representative of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

*Nelsen*: *Laudate Deum* states, in no uncertain terms, that international cooperation to resolve the climate crisis is of paramount importance, and that the world's leaders must step up to make good on their promises at COP28 (The upcoming United Nations meeting on climate change). They won't do that if we don't keep the pressure up.

Civil society organizations, such as faith-based organizations, light the way on issues where governments fall behind. We have to show up to demonstrate that another way is possible, and to demand that member states take action to create a world with a livable future. As Catholic organizations, we can be proud to share *Laudate Deum*'s specific, actionable and urgent exhortation to world leaders.

**_GSR_: You have all described the overall situation with the SDGs as worrying — even bleak. How would you say the overall situation with the U.N. is right now?**

*Blissman*: We're unfortunately in a time when the U.N. is losing the trust of civil society. The structures are just so hampered and so beholden to corporate interests.

We don't have a pathway into being heard. The thing that does give me hope is how many people are organizing for the climate march. But inside the U.N., I think it's just going to be more and more talk without the action coming behind it.

I think it was Einstein who said, "We're going to need a whole different level of thinking to move beyond where we are right now." And the one thing that's clear that I think is unequivocal is that where we are right now [globally] isn't working except for very, very few very wealthy individuals.




Blair Nelsen, lay representative at the U.N. for the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace and the executive director of ecospiritual nonprofit Waterspirit, at

the Sept 17 climate march joined by her son, Noah Prata Nelsen. (GSR photo/Chris Herlinger)

**_GSR_: Are we at a breaking point or a dead end for advocacy at the United Nations?**

*Nelsen*: I've got experience doing grassroots organizing, doing work on the ground. And what I see on the ground is frustration by insufficient lack of access to power. I see a lot of conversations happening around the limitations of changing the world by changing your personal choices. We say a lot in our circles that you can't "personal responsibility" your way out of the climate crisis.

The climate crisis doesn't stop in my house, doesn't stop at national borders. But we still, despite their flaws, require international cooperation mechanisms in order to address global issues. I do not feel the sense of dead end. I feel the energy and the fire to reform. I feel the energy to bring in perspectives that don't treat the world as a set of inert resources for use and exploitation, but rather as something inherently sacred. There is work to do, and I feel energized to do that work. I don't feel dead-ended despite the large obstacles toward substantial input in these processes.

*Brand*: Calling it a "dead end," to me, is extremely negative. Maybe I tend to be more on the optimistic side. Working together, whether it is in faith-based groups, whether it is in an interfaith context, whether it is people passionate about the values that are aligned related to women and children's dignity — that remains important.

That energy and that way of joining our voices is becoming more and more important. And maybe that's not what is dependent upon whether we get into the SDG summit or whether we don't, but more to do with what leads up to it and what comes out of it. And do we try with others to hold countries or member states to be more accountable for the very issues that their people are crying for?

I see that it is in harmony with even things like the movement for solidarity that Pope Francis has called for. I think we have to keep adapting the ways in which we are doing advocacy and how we work together in advocacy.



Beth Blissman, the U.N. representative for the Loretto Community, in 2017 (GSR file photo)

*Blissman*: The church has a huge role to play. And if we look at a large issue like effective legally binding mechanisms to regulate transnational corporations — they have more rights than people now — if we're ever going to get there, the church is going to have to take the lead and play a strong role, a strong moral role. I pray for Pope Francis every day. I pray that the church is up for that justice task because I think that's what Jesus would do.

***GSR*: Looking beyond the SDGs, I know some of you have expressed concern about the diminishment of democracy globally and the rise of autocratic regimes. How worried are you about that?**

*Doherty*: There have been isolated instances of autocratic governments taking control. But now, I think there's a move towards coalescing, and I think that's threatening in terms of people and planet. There's a crisis in terms of civilization. It's almost like the Babylonian times. There's going to be the fall and rise of something new, the fall of what we know. The moneyed countries where the finances are — will they see a way to gracefully share or will they continue to hold onto their monies?

It's not just individuals and the planet, it is governments that have experienced "corporate capture," as well, and are controlled by them. And so, the whole notion of democracy is very fragile.




Sr. Veronica Brand represents the Religious at the Sacred Heart of Mary at the United Nations (GSR file photo)

***GSR*: What do you think is the continued role that faith-based groups — like sister congregations — play at the U.N. at this critical moment?**

*Brand*: I think one aspect of it, and it's just one aspect, is the fact that we are not here as NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] based only in the north, only in the United States. There is a grassroots connection that we bring that many NGOs do not bring. And that is based on the moral, ethical justice, faith-based dimension that I think is becoming more and more important.

So, to me, standing from that ground with the contact with our people on the ground is something that many NGOs do not have the privilege of doing. We see that when we send out [information and testimonies to U.N. bodies] and we try to get the voices of people from our members around the world.

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*Nelsen*: I speak as an "outsider non-sister," but I think sisters are in a particularly interesting position because they're used to doing this kind of bridge work between the grassroots and those hierarchies of power, both within the Catholic Church and that process mirrors itself at the U.N. level as well. They have particular insights into how to engage in that process effectively.

And furthermore, I think sisters and faith-based organizations in general have the gift of being able to use spiritualized language to remind us of what's truly at stake in these discussions. When we violate the sanctity of the world, our very souls are at stake. And it's a privilege and a gift to be able to remind people of that so that we don't take things as business as usual or run of the mill or forget what we're really here for.

***GSR*: Where does that take you all?**

*Doherty*: It's important to "fling ourselves boldly into the crucible of the time that is to come." That is from a new book called *Teilhard De Chardin: A Book of Hours*, interpreting the work of theologian Teilhard De Chardin. For me, that line speaks to where we are in civilization, where we are in terms of this alignment or new alignment. I believe that whatever is going to come is going to shake us all up.

Something in our faith, in the living of it, in the experience of it, in our believing in this God that has revealed this God throughout Scripture and the prophets and through Jesus, and most importantly imaging the life of Jesus as Jesus lived it. He was not, in any sense, protected from the powers. In actual fact, it was the very powers that got him. And so, I think in our call, we're invited on that journey.