NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Recent Pew Poll: Religion and the environment

Rich Heffern | Jan. 4, 2011 Eco Catholic

Submitted by Adam R. Smith. Smith is a leadership fellow at an environmental non-profit in Washington, DC.

"On any given Sunday, across America, pastors are preaching the good news. These men and women of the cloth are challenged weekly to share their thoughts on the infinite in a very finite amount of time. This naturally poses a problem as to what should be included and what is better left for another Sunday. A recent study finds that the majority of Christian preachers in America have been leaving the environment out of their sermons.

"According to a recent Pew study on American religion: 'Just under half (47 percent) of those who attend worship services regularly say that their clergy speak out on the environment? The majority of white Catholics (64 percent), white evangelical Protestants (59 percent) and white mainline Protestants (51 percent) in the survey say that the environment is not discussed at their place of worship.'

"The environmental awareness award, if there were such a thing, would go to Black Protestant congregations: More black Protestants (59 percent) than other religious groups report hearing about the environment from their clergy.

"The full study can be found here: http://pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Few-Say-Religion-Shapes-Immigration-Environment-Views.aspx#2
[1]The survey's conclusion is repeated often in their report. Religion has only a small influence on the environmental views of American Christians.

"While it's hard to know for sure, the differences among denominations might be explained in a variety of anecdotal ways. For example, parishes focused on social justice are likely to see environmental care as part of the social gospel to be preached. They will find ways to speak about "creation care" and its effect on the congregation, and the world at-large. Meanwhile, other churches might not draw connections between the environment and their beliefs due to the socio-political climate of their community. There are churches in this country where global warming is still a mild heresy.

The Catholic Voice

"Acknowledging the difficulty of community dynamics, Catholic priests face an additional hurdle in discussing the environment at Mass. It's a logistical reality; they simply have less time to sermonize. Within the timeframe of a normal Mass, the priest has about 20 minutes to drive home his homily. Taking into consideration that pastors of other denominations routinely have triple that time, it appears Catholic priests are doing a relatively good job spreading the environmental message. According to the Pew study, about 44% of active Catholic churchgoers report that their priest has discussed the environment with them. The percentage of U.S. Catholics hearing this message is very near that of other denominations, even with the added time restraints on Catholic priests. Environmental stewardship is a lesson that needs a voice, and America's Catholic clergy are beginning to be heard.

"For instance, Newsweek wrote a piece back in 2008 entitled the 'The Green Pope', which highlighted the environmental action of Pope Benedict XVI and took notice of the Church's environmental teachings:

"Just months after being elected pope, Benedict stated in his first homily as pontiff that, 'the earth's treasures have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction' and called on Catholics to be better stewards of God's creation. Last spring at a Vatican conference devoted to climate change, Benedict announced that global citizens have to 'focus on the needs of sustainable development.' That message was taken a step further when the church last month announced seven new sins that now require repentance. Number four on the list was 'polluting the environment.' Among the others were 'causing social injustice' and 'becoming obscenely wealthy,' which are also both linked to taking care of the earth, says a Vatican spokesman.'
http://www.newsweek.com/2008/04/16/the-green-pope.html
[2]Eco-sins have arrived and the media has noticed.

Spreading, the Good, and Green, Word

"The Pew study, and articles like the above from Newsweek, show that teachings on the environment have trickled down from the Church hierarchy to local parishes; and people are listening. But is this trickle-down enough? While pronouncements are welcomed, as is the study of lay Catholics made aware, more can still be done. Sadly, the majority of parishes across denominations have yet to be reached with the good, and green, news. And even those that do aren't being pointed to the religious sources which call for environmental care. According to that same Pew study:

'For 10 percent of those who hear about the environment, the messages include explicit religious language and themes promoting stewardship of the earth or care for God?s creation.'

"Only 10 percent? This can, and should, be changed. If the church hierarchies are convinced of the need for action, how is it that the American laity is unable to get the religious message? So, according to Pew, about half of Christian churchgoers in America have heard the environmental message, but only 10% of those have heard the environmental message framed using explicitly religious themes. This has become a problem of communication, not of theology.

"The solution will therefore require that clergymen and women use their imaginative strength to invent new metaphors and reinvigorate old teachings which highlight the connection between caring for our souls and caring for our planet. And when Sunday comes around they need to find ways to fit that teaching into the sermon. The environment can't wait until next Sunday; the stakes have become too high. This Pew study brings begs the question: Until "creation care" comes directly from the pulpit, can we really expect religion to have a strong impact on our environmental attitudes?

A Religious Opportunity
"The U.S. Catholic bishops, who have written much on the topic of religion, human dignity and the environment, are mobilizing around the environmental concerns of the faithful with several initiatives focused on environmental protection and justice for the poor. The following passage was published twenty years ago by the U.S. Catholic bishops, yet still speaks powerfully to the position we find ourselves in today:

"Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human. Our tradition calls us to protect the life and dignity of the human person, and it is increasingly clear that this task cannot be separated from the care and defense of all of creation.' - US Catholic Bishops, Renewing the Earth, 1991, p. 2. http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.shtml [3]

"People can find grounds for morality in their religion. I have in mine. In the opinion of this author, there is an opportunity to awaken that morality to include the environment, every Sunday and in every church. This recent Pew study shows that American clergy have been missing that opportunity."

More on the bishops and the environment can be found here: http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/
[4]
Adam R. Smith can be contacted at: adamrsmith@berkeley.edu

Source URL (retrieved on *04/17/2014 - 05:55*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/eco-catholic/recent-pew-poll-religion-and-environment

Links:
[1] http://pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Few-Say-Religion-Shapes-Immigration-Environment-Views.aspx#2
[2] http://www.newsweek.com/2008/04/16/the-green-pope.html
[3] http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.shtml
[4] http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/