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Interfaith group stresses faith's role in climate politics

Brian Roewe | May. 23, 2013 Eco Catholic

The National Religious Coalition on Creation Care [1] held its 15th annual prayer breakfast in Washington, D.C., Tuesday, where representatives of numerous faiths came together to address the issue of climate change from their respective traditions.

The morning has also doubled as an opportunity to honor individuals exhibiting courage and commitment to environmental care through the Steward of God?s Creation award. This year?s honoree was author and environmental activist Bill McKibben, founder and director of 350.org [2].

?I look at Bill McKibben as a truly prophetic voice in our society,? said Franciscan Fr. Jacek Orzechowski, a member of the coalition on creation care and board member of the Franciscan Action Network.

Past Creation award recipients have included James Hansen, former director of NASA?s Goddard Institute for Space Studies; Lisa Jackson, former head of the Environmental Protection Agency; and Rabbi Warren Stone.

In an email interview with *NCR*, McKibben described the award as a ?great pleasure.?

?I've had the joy of seeing the religious environmental movement blossom from a tiny core of people 25 years ago into a robust part of the greater green thrust,? he said. ?It's always been one of my favorite parts of this work, and it was a happy honor to gather with my colleagues in this fight.?

McKibben has become one of the notable and sought-after speakers on climate change. He has been quoted by numerous publications, and has frequent contributions to the *New York Times*, the Huffington Post, *Rolling Stone* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

His group 350.org has led numerous grassroots campaigns in recent years seeking to educate about climate change (its name refers to the safe upper limit of carbon levels in the atmosphere to avoid further arctic melting), as well as compel people to the action necessary to impede future global warming.

Recent campaigns have included urging universities, municipalities and organizations to divest from fossil fuels, and organizing rallies against the construction of the Keystone XL transnational pipeline, which included a mid-February rally [3] in Washington, bringing an estimated 30,000-plus people from across the country to march in the capital.

In his acceptance remarks Tuesday, McKibben said he stressed the seriousness of the climate issue and the importance of persistent political action, particularly from the fatih community.

?It's very good to green one's church, but by itself it's a gesture. It needs to be combined with political work that does things like try to put a price on carbon,? he said, adding that it?s important for religious leaders be present

?Speaking bluntly, we need more collars on the front lines,? he told *NCR*.

The coalition on creation care is working to take that message to heart. Its prayer breakfast kicked off its annual Washington Week, where religious leaders met with congressional and government representatives to stress the need for legislative action.

It is important for faith leaders to inject into the political process the moral and spiritual dimensions of the climate change crisis, Orzechowski said. Doing so as an interfaith group gives greater credibility and makes their message more difficult to dismiss.

He told *NCR* that there is a growing sense among many traditions ? Judaism, Islam, Catholicism and evangelical Christianity ? that espousing creation care is a core value of their mission.

?It?s not something on the periphery that some people may be kind of interested in, but this really kind of belongs at the center of the mission of faith communities,? he said.

The friar added that it?s not just priests, sisters, rabbis and imams that must speak out.

?It?s not enough for a small group of faith leaders to go and speak to the elected official. We still have a way to go to kind of create a groundswell among the rank-and-file Catholics, and I think it?s already slowly kind of taking place,? he said.

While unable to participate in the political meetings this year, Orzechowski recalled that in recent conversations, Pope Francis? calls for creation care have served as a touchstone in the talks.

Count McKibben among those who have taken notice of Francis? remarks on the environment [4], but also like many, he?s eager to see him ? and other global leaders ? translate those words into action.

?Like President [Barack] Obama, he tweets a good game,? he said, noting the ?powerfully prophetic move? of taking the name of Francis of Assisi and his use of public transportation. ?But we'll see by his action how well he understands the nature of the crisis we face.?

?We have such a great potential as a Catholic church to speak up and to kind of help people to see that the issue of global climate change and degradation of the environment is not just a political or economic issue, but first and foremost a spiritual and moral issue,? Orzechowski said.

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. His email address is **broewe@ncronline.org**.]

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