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Melting glaciers make climate change visible at St. Francis feast events

by Brian Roewe

Eco Catholic

While Pope Francis spent the feast day of his namesake walking the streets of Assisi, more than 320 groups in the U.S. used the day as an opportunity to view a chilling reality.

The events sponsored by the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change presented a clear message: Glaciers have receded at alarming rates, exacerbated by human-induced climate change. Titled "Melting Ice, Mending Creation: a Catholic Approach to Climate Change," the program offered a way to celebrate the feast of St. Francis through education and reflection on the realities of climate change as well as exploring the church's teaching on care for creation.

About 40 people attended a "Melting Ice" event Friday at the Church of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in Chesapeake, Va. Mark Hoggard, the parish's director of lifelong faith formation, said about half of those attending found it surprising the Catholic church and its leadership have spoken about the impacts of climate change on the planet as well as its people, especially the poor.

"I definitely think they found it affirming that this was something the church was concerned about, and was teaching about. I think there was a sense that this was a good thing," he told *NCR*.

At Gonzaga University, in Spokane, Wash., a "Melting Climate" program held Tuesday became an informal launch of the school signing the coalition's St. Francis Pledge. Brian Henning, co-chair of Gonzaga's advisory council on stewardship and sustainability, said the pledge represented a way "to show that our work related to the environmental is fundamental to our message" and an expression of its Catholic and Jesuit identity.

The program paired two elements -- a June 2009 TED talk by photographer James Balog, who has documented glacial changes as part of the Extreme Ice Survey; and a May 2011 report from the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, titled "Fate of Mountain Glaciers in the Anthropocene." -- within the context of prayer, reflection and conversation. The success of last year's Francis feast day event (more than 20,000 people viewing the documentary "Sun Come Up," which showed the plight of climate refugees in the South Pacific) led the coalition to develop a program for this year's celebration.

"We saw that as there's a real appetite for good programming around care for creation, around the feast of St. Francis," Dan Misleh, executive director of the Catholic climate coalition, told *NCR*.

While the coalition targeted Oct. 4 as the program's focal point, Misleh said it will promote the program and make its resources available online throughout the year. In addition, people can sign its St. Francis Pledge online at any time.

In the 2009 TED talk, Balog highlighted his team's work in the Extreme Ice Survey, which has documented glacial recessions around the world since 2007, and produced the award-winning documentary "Chasing Ice." He reported 95 percent of the world's glaciers outside Antarctica are retreating or shrinking.

"Ice is the canary in the global coal mine. It's the place where we can see and touch and hear and feel climate change in action," he said.

Once a climate skeptic himself, Balog said his perspective changed after he decided to document the progression of the glacial landscapes over time. His team has set up more than 30 time-lapse cameras (shooting roughly every hour, but some as frequent as every five minutes) in four glacial regions of the Northern Hemisphere, and visit annually locations in British Columbia, the Andes and the Alps.

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Through their documentation they have sought to present climate change not as an abstract computation of a computer model, but through concrete measurements and visual footage. Or as Balog put it, "The images make the invisible visible."

Shown after a review of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences report, Balog's photography gave a visual lens for understanding its findings. The statement, the result of a meeting of scientists, concluded that glaciers worldwide are shrinking and fragmenting, echoing Balog's observations that the flow speed of Greenland's Ilulissat Glacier into the sea has doubled in the past 20 years, now averaging 125 feet per day.

"The widespread loss of glaciers, ice, and snow on the mountains of tropical, temperate, and polar regions is some of the clearest evidence we have for a change in the climate system, which is taking place on a global scale at a rapid rate," the academy said, adding that human-caused changes in air composition and air quality have led to more than 2 million premature deaths worldwide annually -- particularly among the world's poor.

"But reading about [climate change] is different than seeing the visual evidence. So I think that's why we wanted to link the two, to really kind of show that visual picture," said Misleh, seeing particular benefit for those on the fence about climate change.

At a "Melting Ice" event held at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Indianapolis, attendees felt stunned after

seeing the images. Andy Pike, coordinator of the parish's creation care ministry, recalled people saying the images made climate change obvious, but they also expressed frustration that doubt continues to exist.

"You can hear something intellectually and you can see facts and figures, but the pictures that Balog showed and the pictures that Balog brought were very dramatic," he said.

The group said it's important for Catholics to "get out of comfort zones" and talk to people about the impacts of climate change, but also to consider how actions would affect miners and others in emission-producing industries. That the highest levels of the church backed them in their beliefs was welcome news; still, some yearned for more volume to the issue from the lower levels.

"You don't often hear this sort of message preached from the pulpit," Pike said.

Both the groups at St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Thérèse of Lisieux hope to continue engaging the issue of climate change in their faith communities and not let momentum melt after the St. Francis feast events. That includes evaluating how to communicate the message to others, possibly by tapping into "Francis fever" to highlight the current pontiff's ? in addition to his predecessor Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI ? calls for creation care.

Developing such local leadership was a goal of the program, Misleh said. When people present climate change not as a political debate, but as a core part of being a people of God, the message becomes stronger and the response clearer.

"More and more people will become engaged in the issue of climate change if they can do it from a place of grounding in their faith," he said.

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