Why Gulf Coast Catholics aren't looking to the pope on climate change

By Michael Pasquier
January 13, 2015

When Pope Francis thinks of climate change, he thinks of social justice. In his 2013 inaugural homily as pope, Francis implored “all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political, and social life” to “be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment.” Speaking at an Italian university a year later, Francis announced, “This is our sin, exploiting the Earth and not allowing her to give us what she has within her.” In 2015, Vatican-watchers expect Francis to produce an encyclical that situates climate change within the framework of Catholic social teaching.

Francis’s position on the injustices of climate change is not new to the Roman Catholic Church. His predecessors, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, issued similar pleas for societies around the world to act as responsible stewards of creation. In the 2001 report “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good,” the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops made an obvious observation: “Much of the debate on global climate change seems polarized and partisan.” In a 2013 letter to President Barack Obama, a bishop endorsed by the USCCB identified “the human impact upon the planet’s climate” as “a fundamental moral priority.”

Journalists, scholars, and activists love to quote the pope and his bishops, especially when their words legitimize scientific positions on climate change. But as someone who studies religion in coastal Louisiana—one of the United States’ most Catholic enclaves *and* endangered environments—I can’t recall a single encounter with a person who referenced the Catholic tradition of environmental justice. And you’re unlikely to hear the three most prominent Catholic politicians in the state—Governor Bobby Jindal and Senators David Vitter and Mary Landrieu—talk about it in those terms.

Perhaps I’ve been hanging out with the wrong Catholics. Fishermen, mariners, and oilfield workers, mostly. Men, women, and children who live in a place that encompasses almost 40 percent of the marshland in the United States, and where

miles and miles of that marshland disappear every year because of coastal erosion, sea-level rise, saltwater intrusion, land subsidence, and oil exploration. Between 2004 and 2008—a period that saw Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Gustav, and Ike—Louisiana lost 328 square miles of wetlands. FYI: New York City is 305 square miles.

In light of the environmental dangers facing the Gulf Coast, I teamed up with the filmmaker Zack Godshall to produce *Water Like Stone*, a documentary about the fishing village of Leeville, Louisiana. Based on current land-loss projections, Leeville will be uninhabitable before many of us die. Zack and I met dozens of Leeville's residents. We ate with them. Drank with them. Listened to them. Watched them. Ate some more. Drank some more. And before we knew it, we had a film that rested on the question, What can we learn from a community that formed in the 19th century, thrived in the 20th century, and will die in the 21st century?

Given the existential nature of this question, you can bet that religion came up.

We visited a net maker who put down his needle and thread when the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded off the coast of Louisiana in 2010. He took a job as a deckhand on a shrimp boat and laid containment boom for the rest of the year. He made $50,000 for his work. "You wanna see something?" he asked us. Of course we did. He walked us to his family's cemetery. He pointed and said, "You see that tomb? That's my BP tomb. I got that with my BP money. I guess I'm ready to die now." He was smiling. He was proud.

We spent a few days with a commercial fisherman. He was living in an abandoned shed at the time. Come to find out, his mother was a member of a Catholic religious order in Kansas. He didn't see her much anymore. We asked him how long he expected to stay in Leeville. His answer: "I'm putting it in the hands of God. You know, God's always been pretty good to me. I ask him, I ask God if he'll be good to me." He wasn't smiling. He wasn't proud.

Generally speaking, American Catholics are ignorant of the church's position on the human and natural causes of climate change. In the case of endangered communities like Leeville, people are too busy trying to survive or waiting to die to care about the latest tweet out of the Vatican. No one's counting on the pope and his bishops to save Louisiana's coast.

Our weekly feature Then and Now *harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with the Kripke Center of Creighton University and edited by Edward J. Blum and Kate Bowler.*