

Care for our common home

By Jerry Kotas

Guest Commentary



A common refrain from people who oppose climate change action is to claim lack of scientific expertise. “I am not a scientist, but ... ” peals from daises, town hall meetings and Sunday talk shows throughout the land. Members of our own Colorado congressional delegation seem to have a misunderstanding of the science, as some refuse to accept the scientific consensus that climate change is happening and that we all share some of the responsibility.

I am a scientist, as well as a man of faith. And on Sept. 23, I have the honor of serving at Mass with Pope Francis in Washington, D.C. I appeal to Americans of all faith traditions — including Colorado’s elected officials, who will be witness to Pope Francis’ address to the joint session of Congress

— to heed the pope’s message. We must look at the urgency of addressing climate change not only through the lens of established credible science, but also as caring beings who acknowledge the severe impacts our actions and lifestyle choices have on the poor and those most vulnerable.

In June, Pope Francis issued his historic encyclical, “Laudato Si: Caring for Our Common Home,” highlighting the real world impacts our throwaway culture has on the poor and disadvantaged. The pope declares it our moral imperative to respond to the ravages of climate change with a united and compassionate course of action. The resounding reaction to the pontiff’s vision from a range of faith leaders shows it matters little who we pray to in times of sorrow, need or gratitude. As inhabitants of “Our Common Home,” all human beings have a responsibility to stewardship, creation care and compassion for those most vulnerable.

The response to the pope’s call for interfaith dialogue from Coloradans has been inspiring. In August, the Rocky Mountains provided the backdrop to an event chaired by former Colorado Gov. Bill Ritter, a Catholic. An interfaith panel including a Jesuit priest, Buddhist Zen master and the founder of the Colorado Muslim Society held a passionate discussion on the encyclical’s call to action. Each praised Pope Francis for his great moral leadership on these issues. Leaders from Colorado Interfaith Power & Light founded a grass-roots, multi-faith forum for clergy, fostering religious

understanding of environmental matters. The goal of Souls Going Green, chaired by Rabbi Bernie Gearson and Muslim Sheik Husayn Aziz, is to assemble faith leaders to mobilize their congregations and communities to climate action.

We've mastered the dialogue: Behavioral change comes next, and Colorado's faithful should first read the encyclical at usccb.org and then take action to simplify our own lifestyles and minimize our carbon footprints.

With a global view in mind, the Senate Appropriations Committee recently defeated language that would have prevented the U.S. from contributing to the U.N. Green Climate Fund, intended to help poorer nations reduce their carbon emissions. We are all connected, as Pope Francis says, and following the tenets of the encyclical, our mission must be to help those most in need. I hope the Colorado delegation will support providing disadvantaged nations the clean technologies they need to reduce carbon emissions.

Closer to home, under the recently finalized Clean Power Plan, rules that require states to reduce carbon emissions from power plants, Colorado must lower its CO2 emissions by 28 percent by 2030. The state can and should submit a plan to make the required reductions instead of letting politics obstruct progress.

Pope Francis' encyclical was intended not only for Catholics, but for every person on the planet. He challenges us that we cannot merely innovate our way out of this global mess, but we must change. He challenges us to reconsider behaviors, attitudes and deeply seeded practices, motivated by our concern for our brothers and sisters who are most vulnerable, many of whom are now at great risk.

Deacon Jerry Kotas serves at Our Lady of the Pines Catholic Church in Conifer and sits on the board of Colorado Interfaith Power & Light.