



White House to honor religious leaders for climate, environmental efforts

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Climate change will once again be in the spotlight at the White House today, when the Obama administration honors 12 religious leaders from around the country for "their efforts in protecting our environment and communities from the effects of climate change."

The ceremony is the latest in a series of events and actions in which the administration has tried to paint the Clean Power Plan and other climate policies in a moral light.

U.S. EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy has regularly referenced Pope Francis' environmental encyclical in recent appearances. "When the pope stands up and says that human-induced climate [change] is a serious problem, that we have to take action on it, and it's a moral responsibility; and when I have a president saying all three of those things, as well; and when I have laws that say you've got to do something about it, we're going to take action," McCarthy said at Georgetown University last month ([ClimateWire](#), July 2).

McCarthy discussed the Clean Power Plan at a Vatican meeting earlier this year, and President Obama will host Francis at the White House during the pontiff's trip to Washington, D.C., in September.



The Rev. Canon Sally Bingham, the founder of Interfaith Power and Light. Photo courtesy of [Flickr](#).

Four of the 12 people being honored at the White House are members of the same national coalition: Interfaith Power and Light. The Rev. Canon Sally Bingham founded the group in 1998, with the goal of promoting climate change response as a moral, religious imperative.

Bingham said she and other IPL leaders struggled for years to overcome resistance to the idea that advocacy for conservation, renewable energy, energy efficiency and other efforts fell in line with religious priorities. Over time, she said, she learned how to frame her message so that religious audiences appreciated it. "If you love your neighbor, as we're called to do, you don't pollute your neighbor's air or water," she said, summarizing one talking point.

Bingham said Francis' climate push has given momentum to her group's efforts. The encyclical, she said, has "really amplified the moral dimensions of climate change and given our voice a big boost. I've been talking about how we respond to climate change as a moral issue for the last 18 years. But I'm not the pope."

Huda Alkaff heads IPL's Wisconsin chapter and is the director of the Islamic Environmental Group of Wisconsin. She said their climate change outreach includes educational events, river cleanups and pushes to eat more locally sourced foods with lower carbon footprints.

"This is all connected and tied to faith," Alkaff said. "What faith tells us, with so many verses in the Quran that tell us about taking care of the Earth. It's a trust -- we are responsible for that."

'Obama and the EPA share the Pope's concern'

With the administration expected to roll out its Clean Power Plan within a matter of weeks, there's a chance the landmark regulation will be mentioned during this afternoon's event.

"We will continue to partner with U.S. Catholic and other faith-based organizations, like the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Climate Covenant, to get out the word about the importance of taking action to combat climate change," McCarthy wrote in a **recent blog post** she co-authored with the United States' ambassador to the Vatican. "President Obama and the EPA share the Pope's concern for environmental justice -- our climate crisis is a human crisis."

But as the White House and other politicians race to embrace the pope's message, one prominent Catholic Democrat is a bit more hesitant to wrap policy positions in the Vatican's seal of approval. "It's an important statement. It has to be considered as an important voice," said

Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.). "But it has to be put in proper context.

"These faith doctrines are important -- they can inform you, they can inspire you, they can help you better understand an issue. But no religion can dictate a policy," he said.

And as Casey pointed out, theology can cut both ways when it comes to politics. "[Francis] is saying things more consistent with the point of view that our party has, but there are other days where he'll say things consistent with what the other side believes and the positions they take," said the Catholic lawmaker.

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