

Vatican doing great cutting fossil fuel use, says U.S. energy expert

By Carol Glatz [Catholic News Service](#)

VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- Vatican engineers are doing an impressive job trying to cut Vatican City's dependency on fossil fuels by tapping into renewable energy resources and finding ways to cut energy consumption, said a visiting U.S. expert on energy efficiency.

Mark Hopkins, director of the United Nations Foundation's energy policy program, said that prior to his June 12 visit to Vatican City he had no idea the tiny city-state was involved in so many "significant projects" aimed at reducing its own carbon footprint.

"It's impressive they're actually doing what some people only talk about and (they) are doing it in a significant way," Hopkins told [Catholic News Service](#) June 12.

He said "conceivably, Vatican City could become the first state to be powered by renewable" energy and become the first carbon-neutral nation in the world, partly as a result of its plans to build a large solar farm on property it owns on the outskirts of Rome.

Such a status would put "the church in a great moral position" from which to encourage other nations and individuals to do more in promoting and using clean energy, he said.

The U.S. Embassy to the Vatican invited Hopkins to Rome to speak to journalists about his 35 years of experience in promoting energy efficiency as well as his current work with the United Nations Foundation, which seeks to find solutions to the world's most urgent problems.

He was the second person invited by the embassy to speak to journalists about the environment in June. Walter Grazer, former head of the environmental justice and Europe desks of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for International Justice and Peace, spoke June 3 about the church's efforts in addressing the challenges brought by climate change.

Hopkins also was invited to visit the Vatican's department of technical services and talk with the engineers who have been leading the way in making the Vatican greener.

He was given a tour of the large solar-power generator on top of the Paul VI audience hall, which produces energy estimated at 300,000 kilowatt-hours a year.

"It's quite impressive, very hot and very bright," Hopkins said, adding that the engineers "are top-notch people doing great stuff."

One major project now under way at the Vatican is an attempt by technicians to map exactly where Vatican energy consumption is going, he said.

"On average, in most buildings, about 35 percent of the energy is being wasted; either the building is not operating the right way or is not using advanced technologies" such as high-efficiency lighting, heating or cooling fixtures, he said.

If it turns out one particular building consumes a disproportionate amount of energy, often it means something is wrong that can easily be fixed, resulting in huge savings, he said.

Improved energy efficiency can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60 percent, he said. Further emissions reductions can be obtained through the use of renewable forms of energy.

Increased energy efficiency also happens to be much less costly than capital-intensive investments like solar-power generation, he said.

"We have plenty of energy; the problem is we waste a lot of it," especially by not making offices, factories and homes more energy-efficient, said Hopkins.

He said, "It's been wonderful" that faith communities have been lobbying the U.S. government on climate change and the need to keep the planet a healthy place for generations to come.

Global warming is a right-to-life issue, he said, since "the world will not be very hospitable to life if the climate gets out of hand."

He encouraged the Catholic Church to be more vocal about its efforts in environmental advocacy.

The bishops or individual parishes should develop "a media-savvy campaign that gets the message out" to as wide an audience as possible, he said. One example, he said, would be to issue a challenge or nationwide commitment to cut energy costs by 15 percent over the next five years.

While high-cost projects like solar panels and wind-power farms are "great and fabulous, to me their real value is in the picture -- it's visible," he said.

Unfortunately, that's not the case with "energy efficiency and visualizing people not using energy -- it's a little hard to get people pumped up about that one," he said with a laugh.

So groups or communities like the church could exploit a media-magnet project like solar energy and use it as a symbol of a larger commitment toward efficiency efforts that will have an even greater impact on saving energy, he said.