

The Catholic Climate Covenant

Caring for creation and also for the poor

BY WILLIAM S. SKYLSTAD

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Earth Day on April 22 will mark the unveiling of "The Catholic Climate Covenant," a brain-child of the three-year-old Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, which represents 12 organizations, including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The covenant includes a St. Francis Pledge to Protect Creation and the Poor inspired by the saint's "Canticle of the Sun," which praises creation in the form of earth, water and creatures. St. Francis is an important model for another reason as well: he uniquely links care of creation and care of the poor.

"God's creation is good and it is one," Pope Benedict said last August in Australia at World Youth Day, as he introduced the theme of protecting God's creation. Benedict declared that sustainable development and care for our environment are "of vital importance for humanity." Then he framed the moral dimensions of environmental justice and care for creation in the form of a challenge to the "brutal consumption of creation," where the whole is treated merely as "our property" that we consume "for ourselves alone." Benedict cautioned that effective initiatives to prevent the destruction of creation can be developed and implemented, but "only where creation is considered as beginning with God" (Aug. 6, 2008).

In the United States, an increasing awareness of climate change and its attendant issues is signaled by private and public efforts to conserve energy. State governments are introducing bills and forming policies to reduce fossil fuel emissions and are crafting incentives for homeowners and businesses to conserve and to consider renewable energy alternatives. The president and the Congress are making

similar proposals at the national level, setting off a major debate over how best to respond to the complexities of climate change. In a debate dominated by environmental groups, scientists and alternative energy entrepreneurs on the one hand, and by utilities, agribusiness, coal and oil companies and others with vested interests, on the other hand, the Catholic Church and Christian interfaith leaders are lifting up the moral dimensions of climate change. Our Christian faith calls us to bring together the biblical mandate to care for the “garden” (Gn 1:28-30) and also to care “for the least of these” (Mt 25). As our nation deliberates on future policies, American Catholics offer a distinctive position that combines care for God’s creation with protection for those who are poor and vulnerable.

The church is not setting itself against science on this issue, not at all. Instead, Pope Benedict relies on scientific research. “With increasing clarity, scientific research demonstrates that the impact of human actions in any one place or region can have worldwide effects,” Benedict wrote in a letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (Sept. 1, 2007). The pope went on to note that the consequences of disregard for the environment “always harm human co-existence” and “betray human dignity and violate the rights of citizens who desire to live in a safe environment...”

Climate change is largely a result of the way in which the world has undertaken industrialization, used and abused natural resources for energy (transportation, heating and cooling), and neglected the resulting pollution and other adverse affects on the fragile ecosystems of the planet. Its adverse effects are global. The nations, particularly the industrialized nations, must now find remedies.

Pope Benedict’s sophisticated understanding of these issues is apparent in the same letter, where he discusses a responsibility that industrialized countries and those becoming more industrialized share. “While it is true that industrializing countries are not morally free to repeat the past errors of others by recklessly continuing to damage the environment,” he wrote, “it is also of the case that highly industrialized countries must share ‘clean technologies’ and ensure that their own markets do not sustain demands for goods whose very production contributes to the proliferation of pollution.”

Climate change is already affecting the planet and its people in very real ways. And the adverse effects could make life more difficult for those least able to cope with the consequences of climate change (see the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 4th Assessment Report, available online). While not every weather-related natural disaster can be directly linked to climate change, it is clear from those who are studying climate change that weather disruptions—prolonged droughts, more intense rains, melting glaciers, and so on—will become more common.

Two years ago, the Coalition held a hearing on climate change at the request of the Alaskan bishops. An elder from the Eskimo village of Newtok told the participants how his village now regularly floods in the fall because the sea ice is forming later and later, allowing storm swells up the river. State and federal funds are being used to relocate the village to higher ground. But think of all the places on earth where such resources are not available? What happens to those people, their livelihoods, their families, neighbors and friends?

Many scientists warn that African nations now feel the brunt of the negative impact of climate change and that they will continue to do so. In Ethiopia, nearly one-fifth of its population (12 million people) is currently receiving food aid due to chronic drought. Breaking the cycle of drought and starvation has always been difficult in this part of the world, but new and more plentiful resources will be needed to respond to humanitarian crises such as this—mitigating the impacts of climate change—and also for adaptation efforts that help poor nations cope in the long-term with an altered climate.

These examples highlight the need to reduce our own greenhouse gases through new technology and energy efficiencies, sharing these new ways with the poorest countries around the world. Our nation must demonstrate leadership in helping developing nations grow their economies in more environmentally sustainable ways.

Working Behind the Scenes

Since the moral and human dimensions are often neglected or missing in the dialogue over how to respond to climate change, the Catholic community and its interfaith partners have a duty to speak for the voiceless and to bring together issues of social justice and environmental stewardship. This is the mission of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, and on this issue the Catholic community took an early lead.

Seven years ago, the U.S. Catholic bishops adopted an unprecedented statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*. In it the bishops insisted that responses to climate change be guided by: prudence, which requires wise action now to address problems that will grow in magnitude and consequence; bold and generous action on behalf of the common good, rather than in compliance with narrow interests; and a clear priority for the poor, who bear the greatest burdens and pay the greatest price for the consequences climate change. “At its core, global climate change is not simply about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures,” the bishops wrote. “Rather, global climate change is about the future of God’s creation and the

one human family. It is about protecting both the ‘human environment’ and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God’s creation and our responsibility to those who come after us.”

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is leading efforts with other members of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment to help shape the climate change legislation before Congress. Without that collective voice, key provisions that address the poverty dimensions of climate change would have been weakened or eliminated from the first climate change legislation to be debated (but not adopted) by the Senate. The Partnership is still working to ensure that the new legislation includes provisions to protect poor people in the United States who face rising energy costs, and also provisions to assist developing countries in adapting to the negative effects of climate change. In mid-February hundreds of Catholic leaders went to Capitol Hill as part of a Catholic Social Ministry Gathering to make this precise case with their senators and representatives.

The Covenant and the Pledge

The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, as we noted in the opening paragraph, is also launching a practical, education and action initiative. Individual Catholics, families, parishes, schools, religious communities, dioceses and other Catholic organizations are invited to commit to the St. Francis Pledge and join The Catholic Climate Covenant. The covenant provides concrete ways of responding to Scripture and Catholic teaching, while demonstrating a concern for both the planet and its people. Through a new Web site, video, and ad campaign with outreach to dozens of cooperating national organizations, Catholics are being asked to take Pledge and agree to: *pray and reflect* on the duty to care for God’s creation and protect the poor and vulnerable; *learn about* and educate others on *the moral dimensions* of climate change; *assess our participation*—as individuals and organizations—in contributing to climate change; *act to change choices and behaviors* that contribute to climate change; and *advocate Catholic principles and priorities* in discussions and in decision making on climate change, especially as it affects the poor and vulnerable. A new Web site (<http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/index.shtml>) will provide concrete ways for Catholics to fulfill their pledge.

With Pope Benedict’s strong voice, with clear leadership by the U.S. Catholic bishops, by joining together in The Catholic Climate Covenant and the St. Francis Pledge, and by reclaiming our ancient traditions of caring for creation and for God’s people, the Catholic community will play an increasingly important role in addressing climate change. It is one way of demonstrating true solidarity with our broth-

ers and sisters in a finite yet abundant planet.

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