



Global Climate Change

A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good

(abridged text)

Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with climate change...? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of “environmental refugees,” who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it.... in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement?

— Pope Benedict XVI
2010 World Day of Peace

Introduction

As people of faith, we are convinced that “the earth is the Lord’s and all it holds” (Psalm 24:1)... We believe our response to global climate change should be a sign of our respect for God’s creation.

The continuing debate about the United States’ [response] to climate change is a test and an opportunity for our nation... As bishops, we ...call for a different kind of national discussion. Much of the debate seems polarized and partisan. Science is too often used as a weapon, not as a source of wisdom. The search for the common good... [is] neglected.

At its core, global climate change is... about the future of God’s creation and the one human family. It is about protecting the human environment and the natural environment... and stewardship of God’s creation as well as our responsibility to those who come after us.

Because of the blessings God has bestowed on our nation, the United States bears a special responsibility in its stewardship of God’s creation...

As Catholic bishops, we accept the conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on

Climate Change (IPCC)... Over the past few decades, the evidence of global climate change and the emerging scientific consensus about the human impact on this process have led many governments to conclude that they need to invest time, money, and political will to address the problem...

The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing climate change. Prudence... allows discernment for the common good.... Prudence is not ... simply a cautious approach to decisions. Rather, it is a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned basis for taking action to achieve a moral good.

In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response.... Significant levels of scientific consensus ...can obligate action to avert potential dangers.

According to the IPCC, significant delays in addressing climate change compound the problem and make future remedies more difficult, painful, and costly. On the other hand, prudent actions today can potentially improve the situation over time, avoiding more sweeping action in the future.

Climate Change and Catholic Social Teaching

We face two central moral questions: How are we to be stewards of creation in an age when we may have the capacity to alter that creation, perhaps irrevocably? How can we ...exercise stewardship in a way that respects and protects the integrity of God’s creation and provides for the common good? Catholic social teaching provides several themes to help answer these questions.

* **The Universal Common Good**

Global climate is part of the planetary commons. The earth's atmosphere encompasses all people, creatures, and habitats. The melting of ice sheets and glaciers, the destruction of rain forests, and the pollution of water in one place can have environmental impacts elsewhere. Responses to global climate change should reflect our interdependence and common responsibility for the future....

* **Stewardship of God's Creation**

Stewardship requires... careful protection of the environment... True stewardship requires changes in human actions. Our religious tradition has always urged restraint and moderation in the use of material goods... We must not allow our desire to possess more material things overtake our concern for the basic needs of people and the environment. Changes in lifestyle based on moral virtues can ease the way to a sustainable economy in which sacrifice will no longer be an unpopular concept. ... A renewed sense of sacrifice and restraint could make an essential contribution to addressing global climate change.

* **Protecting the Environment for Future Generations**

The common good calls us to extend our concern to future generations. Passing along the problem of global climate change to future generations as a result of our delay or self-interest would be easy. But as stewards of their heritage, we have an obligation to respect their dignity and to pass on their natural inheritance, so that their lives are protected and, if possible, made better than our own.

* **Population and Authentic Development**

Population and climate change should be addressed from the perspective of a concern for protecting human life, caring for the environment, and respecting cultural norms and the religious faith and moral values of peoples.

* **Caring for the Poor and Issues of Equity**

Working for the common good requires us to promote the flourishing of all human life and all of God's creation.... No strategy to confront climate change will succeed without the leadership and participation of the United States and other industrial nations. But any successful strategy must include participation from those most affected and least able to bear the burdens. Developing and poorer nations must have a place at the table.

The Public Policy Debate and Future Directions

The stronger and richer nations must have a sense of moral responsibility for other nations, so that an international system may be established which will rest on the foundation of the equality of all peoples and the necessary respect for their legitimate differences.

CONCLUSION

Our national debate over solutions to global climate change needs to move beyond the uses and abuses of science... to a striving for a civil, constructive debate about U.S. decisions and leadership in this area.

As people of religious faith, we bishops believe that the atmosphere that supports life on earth is a God-given gift, one we must respect and protect. If we harm the atmosphere, we dishonor our Creator and the gift of creation. The values of our faith call us to humility, sacrifice, and a respect for life and the natural gifts God has provided.

Pope John Paul II reminds us that "respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God." In that spirit, we Catholic bishops call for prudent and constructive action to protect God's precious gift of the earth's atmosphere with a sense of genuine solidarity and justice for all God's children.

– Msgr. William P. Fay
General Secretary
U.S. Catholic Conference of
Bishops

