

Opening Comments
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A Catholic Dialogue on Climate Change
Anchorage, Alaska
June 2, 2007

Let me begin by thanking all of you for being here today, but especially our speakers and panelists. We are looking forward to your presentations, your challenges and your suggestions for us as we discern more carefully an authentically Catholic approach to the moral questions around climate change.

Several years ago, the bishops of the United States issued a major statement urging the Catholic community to exercise a convening role to help bring about a more civil, thoughtful and sustained dialogue on climate change and to emphasize the moral implications of a warming planet for all life, especially the poor and vulnerable. In our statement, we suggested that the old fashioned virtue of prudence, the search for the common good and a priority for the needs of the poor guide the debate and decisions on climate change.

Since that time, almost all climate scientists have come to agree that human activity is a primary cause for global warming. What seems less certain are the consequences of that warming—for God's creation, for human health, for economic life and for how we live together on this earth. Today, many responsible leaders in business, human services and health care, researchers and government officials, environmentalists and economists and yes, communities of faith are taking greater notice and calling for prudent and effective action. Representatives from many of these sectors are here today and they bring a variety of views about what we face and what we should do about it.

Some may call for dramatic action to be implemented immediately to begin to significantly reduce greenhouse gases. Others may warn that sweeping and quick action could produce serious harm to the economy, potentially hurting the very people we in the Church are especially concerned about: the poor. While our dialogue today may not fully answer some of these questions, we believe it is important nonetheless to lift them up and focus them so we can make wise and necessary choices.

We come together today to learn from one another and to listen and learn as a community of faith, not another interest group. We come together today as people of faith, and not just environmentalists or scientists, businesses or service providers, government officials or researchers.

This type of dialogue may not please or satisfy the already polarized and powerful interests, but we believe our role is to raise different questions: What is the right thing to do? Who pays the price for climate change and for policies to mitigate and adapt to it?

As a pastor, teacher, bishop and resident of this beautiful and vulnerable state, I am looking forward to our time together with great hope and humility. I am no expert, but I have witnessed some of the impacts in Alaska. Our state, perhaps more than any other U.S. state, is feeling these impacts in dramatic ways. Plans are being laid to move entire villages that are threatened by winter storms that were once held at bay by a solidly frozen ocean. Fishing and hunting patterns have been disrupted and this is adding increased pressures to villages that depend to some degree on a subsistence lifestyle. Our forests are under attack from insects, lack of water and forest fires. This year, organizers for our famous Iditarod dog sled race had to consider alternative routes due to lack of snow cover.

Conferences and hearings on climate change are not new to our state. It seems that at least a half dozen such meetings have taken place in the past year. Many were focused on threats to wildlife and our way of life. So why have we convened yet another session about climate change? Because we're discovering that the concerns of and threats to poor people in Alaska and around the world are not well represented in these conferences or the public policy debate.

The way forward for us today will involve a series of important presentations followed by a structured discussion about what might be appropriate next steps for the Catholic community in Alaska. This dialogue is the third such event this year and more are being planned. Taken together, our hope is that these hearings will help the bishops and the broader Catholic community define more clearly and precisely what our faith teaches us and demands of us, what practical and public policy actions make the most sense, and which what steps advance the principles that we believe are central in this debate, namely, prudence, poverty and the common good.

We will begin with an exploration of what Church teaching has to say about climate change and the principles that may help shape our efforts on this important moral issue.

We will then enjoy a presentation on the science of climate change and potential impacts for Alaska and other parts of the globe.

During lunch, we'll be asking you to reflect on what you heard and share those thoughts with each other. This is the "dialogue" part of our day: learning from each other and trying to come to some common understanding of what we, as a community, might do to lessen the impacts of climate change, particularly on poor people.

After lunch, we will hear from a panel of experts representing the energy industry (both extractive industries and alternative energy interests). They will elaborate on how they view climate change and will be asked to respond to a couple of basic questions: What threats and opportunities does climate change hold for your business? What recommendations—both practical and public policy—might you have for the Catholic community as we work to find common ground for the common good?

A second panel will consist of other businesses and services: tourism, health and human services and native Alaskan interests. These panelists will be asked the same questions as the first panel.

At the end of the day we will seek your input and ask you questions about how the Church might proceed with both practical and public policy suggestions.

In summary, it is my view that global climate change is a prime example of how our debate and decisions should reflect the pursuit of the common good, rather than the search for economic, political or other narrow advantage. Our obligation to pass on the gift of God's creation to future generations without doing irreversible harm is but one aspect of the demands of the common good.

So today, we want to look at this issue not from the top down, but from the bottom up—especially how it might affect the lives and dignity of the most vulnerable of God's children, here in Alaska and beyond.

I am delighted that you have taken time out of your busy schedules to be here and I am looking forward to listening with you to our speakers, to learning a lot and to participating in this impressive and unprecedented dialogue.