

Wenski: Let 3 themes guide response to climate change  
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In late January, a report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that "the warming of the climate is unequivocal" and that "continued greenhouse-gas emissions at or above current rates would cause further warming and induce many changes in the global climate system during the 21st century that would very likely be larger than those observed during the 20th century."

Once it had been easy to dismiss those who issued such warnings as alarmist "tree huggers." And, in many parts of the world, "greens," as radical environmentalists are sometimes described, advance an ideological agenda no less hostile to Judeo-Christian values than that of the "reds" of another era.

But given our own experience in this state with unusually violent and unseasonable storms, some prudence is certainly called for. Even President Bush addressed the challenges of global climate change in his recent State of the Union message, and Congress is conducting a series of hearings in which a variety of proposals are being advanced.

A case can be made for serious and urgent action to address the potential consequences of climate change. To do nothing could be dangerous and costly to the flourishing of humankind on this planet. But it is important that the moral and human dimensions of the challenges that global climate change present to our government leaders not be overwhelmed by political, economic or ideological pressures.

As the great Pope John Paul II stated, "man is the way of the Church." And so, while bishops are pastors and teachers and not scientists, we do offer with modesty and respect our own contribution to the debate.

In *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good* (June 2001), the U.S. Catholic bishops insisted, "At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, not about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It 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."

Three themes drawn from Catholic social teaching can help inform how policymakers respond to global climate change:

First, a "priority for the poor" must ensure that the needs of the poor and vulnerable around the world are not forgotten. We know too well that they are the ones left behind and who pay the greatest price when disasters, floods or droughts occur.

Second, our debate and decisions should reflect "the pursuit of the common good," rather than the search for economic, political or other narrow advantage. 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.

Finally, the "practice of prudence," which often restrains us from acting in haste, in this case "requires us to act with urgency" lest the problem gets worse and the remedies more costly.

Certainly there are no easy solutions, but those who seek good solutions must seek to define and refine what prudence and the pursuit of the common good require. The moral measure of any proposed solution is how it can help mitigate the ways that climate change and its remedies burden the poor and the vulnerable.

Thomas G. Wenski is the bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Orlando. A special hearing on the anticipated impact of climate change in Florida will be held on March 9 at the Diocese of Orlando Chancery. For more information, call 407-246-4820.

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