

Opening Comments
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Florida Catholic Conference/Diocese of Orlando
Hearing on Climate Change and the Catholic Community

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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 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. This unprecedented statement called for bishops to exercise our 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.

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. But even in the face of this future uncertainty—or more precisely because of this uncertainty—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. This kind of serious discussion is needed and this hearing today is not intended to settle these questions, but rather 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 try to discover together where are areas of convergence and common action. We will try 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 may not please or satisfy the already polarized and powerful interests, but we will raise and address 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 of Florida, I am looking forward to our time together with great hope and humility. I am no expert, but I do serve as chairman of our Bishops' Committee on International Policy and recently wrote the leaders of the Administration, the Congress, business and environmental organizations calling for the kind of serious discussion we will have today. Some of these concerns were also reflected in my recent article in the Orlando Sentinel. So I am here to listen and to learn and I thank you for joining in this important common effort.

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 Florida. This hearing is the first of several similar gatherings to take place over the course of a year in other states. Taken together, our hope is that these hearings will help us 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 presentations by two scientists who have spent the greater portion of their academic careers examining some of the key questions around climate change and its impacts. They will share with us not only what is going on with our global climate, but help us understand what some of the consequences could be for Florida and the rest of the planet.

We will then explore a little more fully what our Church has to say about climate change, what Catholic principles shape our efforts and why this is a moral issue. Walt Grazer from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops will help us review the resources, mandates and priorities the Church brings to this discussion and particularly on these three guiding principles.

After lunch, we will hear from a panel of experts representing very different businesses and services who will briefly elaborate on how climate change might impact their work and our lives and offer some suggestions about possible and appropriate policy and practical actions for our Catholic community.

Finally, Dr. Joe Iannone from St. Thomas University will guide us through a process of discussion to see if and where there might be some consensus among the participants that could help guide our efforts on this issue in Florida. It may be that we'll agree to meet again, that we need a more robust education plan, that one particular policy is better than that one. Whatever the outcome for us today, the fact that we're together discussing a complicated issue in light of our faith and with civility, honesty and integrity is, I believe, time well spent and an example for others.

In the letter I wrote several weeks ago, I said that, "global climate change is a pre-eminent 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. We urge you to resist and restrain predictable interest group pressures and narrow appeals. Instead, we urge you to help build up common ground for common action to advance 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 Florida 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.