

Press Release  
March 9, 2007

## Florida's Catholic Leaders Discuss Climate Change and Poverty

Catholic leaders from around the state gathered in Orlando for a daylong hearing on how poor people in Florida and around the world may be impacted by climate change.

In his opening comments, Most Reverend Thomas Wenski, Bishop of Orlando and Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on International Policy, affirmed the scientific consensus that climate change is happening but urged policy makers to “look at this issue from the bottom-up, not just the top down.”

As practical and policy options are debated in the public square, Bishop Wenski acknowledged that there are stakeholders on one side of the debate saying that we need “dramatic action” while others warn that such action could seriously harm the economy and hurt “the very people we in the Church are especially concerned about: the poor.”

He cautioned that the hearing was not designed to settle who's right and who's wrong in this debate. “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,” Bishop Wenski said.

We come together today as a “community of faith, not another interest group,” he continued.

While the impacts of climate change are uncertain, he said, this uncertainty is still leading, “many responsible leaders in business, human services and health care, researchers and government officials, environmentalists and economists and yes, communities of faith,” to call for prudent and effective action.

The hearing included presentations from:

- ∞ Dr. Bill Chameides, chief scientist for Environmental Defense on the possible global implications of climate change;
- ∞ Dr. Ricardo Alvarez, an adjunct professor at Florida International University on how climate change may impact Floridians, especially low-income people working in the service and agriculture industries;
- ∞ Walt Grazer, director of the Environmental Justice Project at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops outlined Catholic teaching on the issue of climate change focusing on prudence poverty and the common good;
- ∞ Mr. Gary Landry, Vice President of the Florida Insurance Council on the challenges for property insurance in the state as well as legislative remedies to insuring Florida's homes and businesses;

- ∞ Ms. Liza McFadden, President to the Volunteer Florida Foundation on the mobilization of emergency service providers in the wake of large weather-related events and how the faith community may be able to do even more to help those in need;
- ∞ Ms. Susan Glickman of the Southern Alliance for Clean Energy on alternative energy choices available for Floridians and highlighted some of the inconsistencies in the public policy approach to energy.

At the end of the day, Dr. Joseph Iannone of St. Thomas University in Miami, helped facilitate a discussion among the state's Catholic leaders to discover ways in which the Catholic community might engage in educational and action-oriented programs with a view toward ensuring that Florida's poor and vulnerable have a voice in decisions that impact their lives.

This hearing is the first of several being organized around the country by the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, an organization with links to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and funded through the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, of which USCCB is a member. Upcoming hearings include Ohio and Alaska.

Together, these hearings will help the Catholic community in the United States define more clearly and precisely what practical and public policy actions make the most sense and that are consistent with Catholic social teaching.