

A Catholic Approach to Climate Change

Question and Answer Resource

The *Catholic Coalition on Climate Change* offers this resource as a way to respond to frequently asked questions raised in the context of our activities in the Catholic community.

Faith Questions

Why is climate change an issue for people of faith?

Honoring creation is another way to honor God who created all that is. If we value our relationship with God and God's creation, climate change must be for us a profoundly spiritual, ethical and moral issue.

- The human contribution to climate change represents one of the clearest examples of how human activity is damaging the God's creation. We need to recover spiritual values that respect God's creation.
- For those of us in economically developed countries, we must examine the ethic of responsible use of the world's resources. Climate change will demand of us a more responsible lifestyle that uses less of the world's resources so that we can begin to share the gifts of creation more fully with those at the margins of human development. For the sake of God's creation, for the poor and for all of us, we must learn to live more sustainably.
- It is a moral issue because while the poor have contributed the least to climate change, they will suffer its worst consequences. Catholic social teaching, based on biblical and Church teaching call us to consider first how our actions affect poor and vulnerable people. We have a special obligation to respond to our brothers and sisters in need.

It is wise to apply the virtue of prudence to the issue of climate change. Pope Benedict XVI defined this in the World Day of Peace Message:

- Prudence does not mean failing to accept responsibilities and postponing decisions; it means being committed to making joint decisions after pondering responsibly the road to be taken, decisions aimed at strengthening that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.

Is climate change a “pro-life” issue?

While climate change may not be considered a “core” pro-life issue such as abortion, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, embryonic stem-cell research and the death penalty, it may be helpful to see it as consistent with pro-life concerns. Scientists predict millions of people (mostly poor

people) will be subjected to deadly droughts, floods, heat-waves and extreme weather events such as tropical storms and hurricanes. In addition, a dramatically altered climate will impact generations yet to be born. Our actions today could reduce or increase this future risk.

Does caring about environmental issues like climate change show a lack of trust in God's promises (e.g. God's promise to Noah after the flood)?

God gave us free will. We can choose between right and wrong. Just as we don't expect God to save us if drive after drinking too much, neither should we expect God to save us from environmental degradation caused by our own careless actions or inattention to the harm we are creating. Reason demands that we discern what scientists are telling us, investigate the options for minimizing our human contributions to climate change, and creatively explore the long-term changes required.

Shouldn't we concentrate more on the condition of our soul and preparing for eternal life rather than be overly concerned about what happens to this earth?

The earth and its fullness are the Lord's. God created the world and affirmed, "it is very good". God clearly loves creation. If we love God, then we should care for that which God loves. Caring about the well-being of the earth and God's creatures, especially members of the human family, is a fundamental response to God's love.

This question and the preceding one were addressed by Msgr. Pietro Parolin, of the Vatican Secretary of State, on September 24, 2007. He responded:

In recent times, it has been unsettling to note how some commentators have said that we should actually exploit our world to the full, with little or no heed to the consequences, using a world view supposedly based on faith. We strongly believe that this is a fundamentally reckless approach. At the other extreme, there are those who hold up the earth as the only good, and would characterize humanity as an irredeemable threat to the earth, whose population and activity need to be controlled by various drastic means. We strongly believe that such assertions would place human beings and their needs at the service of an inhuman ecology. I have highlighted these two extreme positions to make my point, but similar, though less extreme attitudes, would also clearly impede any sound global attempts to promote mitigation, adaptation, resilience and the safeguarding of our common future.

Isn't this another attempt by the Church to make us feel guilty (i.e. about climate change and the American way of life)?

Faith is about hope. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the issue of climate change and to worry about what kind of world future generations will inherit. Such worry can either paralyze us or motivate us to change. Christians are a people of hope who, through the Holy Spirit, are called to

renew the face of the earth. We must envision a future where we live in a sustainable, co-creative relationship with God's creation. Through prayer, the sacraments and by working interdependently, in communion with others, we can trust the bounty of the earth to be sufficient and sustainable for all.

Science Questions

Don't scientists disagree about climate change?

The bishops, since their 2001 statement, have relied on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change as an authority on this issue. The IPCC is made up of thousands of scientists from hundreds of nations and issues reports every few years. Their latest report (2007) says that climate change is occurring and is definitively caused by human activities. The U.S. National Academy of Sciences has issued numerous consensus statements on climate change as well. The debate now focuses more on what to do about climate change and the economic, political, social and cultural costs of proposed actions or of inaction.

How can human activity be the cause of current climate change when there have always been natural variations and cycles in the climate?

Past variations in climate were most often related to changes in the composition of gases in the atmosphere, particularly carbon dioxide (CO₂) just as is the case today. The higher the CO₂ levels, the warmer the atmosphere. There is some uncertainty about what caused those past fluctuations in CO₂ levels. But by and large, they happened over long periods of time. What is unique about the current situation, is that levels of CO₂ and some other polluting gases are rising very quickly in the atmosphere – significant, measurable increases over decades, not over thousands of years. According to NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association) pre-industrial levels of CO₂ were 278 parts per million (ppm). That level did not vary more than 7 ppm during the 800 years between 1000 and 1800 A.D. Atmospheric levels of CO₂ have increased to 378 ppm (2004), an increase of 36% due to human activities. The IPCC projects that levels could reach 450 ppm by 2050 driven by current and future use of fossil fuels, particularly by large developing nations.

Could climate change be a good thing? For instance, would there be less food insecurity since warmer weather and more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere stimulate plant growth?

The scientific analyses of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, the U.S. Global Climate Research Project and others project a range of impacts from a warmer atmosphere. In some areas, particularly higher latitudes in both hemispheres, it is possible that crop production will be stimulated. However, potential yield increases may be offset by higher temperatures and unpredictable water variability (too much or too little). But from a global perspective, there will be more situations of negative consequences than positive ones pointing to serious threats to food security. The areas where there is likely to be the most negative impacts to agriculture are regions

where people are already living with serious malnutrition and low agricultural production: Africa, Southeast Asia, and small island states, especially.

Why worry about climate change now? Isn't it a scientific prediction for the far off future?

People and ecosystems are already suffering from human-induced climate change. The fourth major assessment report of the climate science by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change this year documents with greater certainty than ever before that the warming atmosphere is already causing disruptions in climate pattern. Sea levels are rising, displacing people and disrupting agriculture. Droughts in certain regions are becoming more protracted with more people affected. Extreme weather events such as flooding and intense storms are becoming more frequent. These patterns will intensify the longer we delay taking action to reduce the causes of climate change.

The bishops of Alaska held a hearing in June 2007 and heard dramatic testimony from native Alaskans, fisheries and forestry experts, the tourism and oil industries and others about the impacts in their state. True to scientists' predictions, the higher latitudes are currently experiencing much more warming than those closer to the equator with serious implications for all life, including human life.

Political questions – national and international

Some say that by supporting climate change legislation—such as a cap and trade approach—will result in an uneven division of costs and benefits. Who will be the winners and losers if we have climate change legislation?

It is true that if a cap-and-trade program is designed incorrectly, it could certainly harm the poor. Depending on how it is designed, energy companies and others could make millions of dollars each year trading permits, but bear little of the costs of real CO₂ reductions. Designed another way, such legislation could significantly increase costs for energy consumers hitting the poor the hardest. But religious leaders, including John Carr of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops who testified before the U.S. Senate in June 2007, contend that a well-designed program could help reduce greenhouse gas pollution to forestall global warming and ensure that new resources are generated, allocated to protect the poor at home and overseas from the worst consequences of climate change, and provide for workers displaced by restrictions on emissions.

Surely communities of faith have no role in such public policy issues as climate change. What about separation of church and state?

Climate change is a public policy issue because it impacts the common good. Climate change will require changes in our society including how we use energy, transportation, and consumption patterns. Self-interested individuals, businesses and politicians will resist such changes because of the benefits they receive now in the current energy configuration. However, we are a community of

faith that cannot stand by while vulnerable people and God's creation suffers. We must address climate change because, for us, it is more than a political or scientific or ecological issue. It is a spiritual, ethical and moral issue.

Aren't proposals to address climate change a threat to individual freedoms and the American way of life?

Remedies calling for reduction in CO₂ emissions and energy consumption restrict freedom in the way that speed limits curtail dangerous driving and promote the common good. Adjustments called for by climate change need not be threatening. Many of these changes will have economic benefits and be "win-win" strategies. For instance, we could all save money with efficiency improvements in appliances, homes and cars: they will use less energy. If our public transit were improved significantly we could drive less, traffic congestion would be reduced and air quality improved. Many of the needed changes would be life-enhancing rather than diminishing.

But beyond our own comfort level, our faith also teaches us that we must be in solidarity with those suffering at home and around the world. The world's resources are meant for all to share. Those of us in wealthier countries have no more right to these finite resources than the poorest people on earth. The "common good" has strong roots in the Bible and in Catholic teaching that demonstrate God's concern with the well-being of all of creation including human life. We are called to discern what it means to be faithful servants in God's mission for His beloved creation.

Is there any hope for legislative action to address climate change?

Though some resistance to public policy remedies to climate change remains at the federal level, cities and states are less reticent. The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) is an organization of municipal governments that have made a commitment to sustainability. There are nearly 1,000 municipalities worldwide that are ICLEI members including U.S. cities such as Atlanta, Austin, Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Newark, Portland, San Francisco, Seattle and Tucson. (More information on ICLEI available at: <http://www.iclei.org/>). The U.S. Conference of Mayors Annual Meeting adopted a strong resolution calling on the federal and state governments to adopt greenhouse gas emission reduction targets.

California has become a leader in adopting new energy technologies and demanding more efficiency in their transportation systems and buildings. The Northeastern states have formed a compact known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative that will help reduce reliance on fossil fuels.

Why should the United States be expected to make changes to address climate change while big developing countries such as China and India are let off the hook?

Emissions of greenhouse gases from large developing nations such as China, India and Brazil are increasing with the growth of their economies. However, there are several points that should be noted:

- There are billions of people still living in desperate poverty in countries like China, India and Brazil – improvement in their lives is dependent on increased economic development;
- The per capita emissions of these countries is far below that of the US as are their historic emissions;
- They are taking some steps to tackle climate change – China is currently improving its energy efficiency at a much faster rate than the US; India has one of the largest solar energy programs in the world; Brazil has the largest use of ethanol for motor vehicles of any country;
- Most importantly, without strong U.S. leadership in reducing emissions, our credibility and leverage are compromised.

The Holy Father addressed this question in his 2008 World Day of Peace Message:

In this regard, it is essential to “sense” that the earth is “our common home” and, in our stewardship and service to all, to choose the path of dialogue rather than the path of unilateral decisions. Further international agencies may need to be established in order to confront together the stewardship of this “home” of ours; more important, however, is the *need for ever greater conviction about the need for responsible cooperation*. The *problems looming on the horizon are complex and time is short*. In order to face this situation effectively, there is a need to act in harmony.

Economic Questions

Wouldn't the proposals to address climate change have drastic negative economic consequences both for the United States and the global economy?

Adequately addressing the causes of human-induced climate change will mean economic opportunities and challenges. Some sacrifice may be required but the principle of solidarity may demand that those of us with more than our share of earth's finite resources also demonstrate a greater degree of responsibility for solving the problem and a willingness to look critically at our consumption patterns. In addition:

- There may be far greater negative economic consequences for doing nothing to address climate change. A significant increase in droughts, floods and extreme weather events can cost the US and the global economy much more than the proposed positive actions to address climate change.
- The economy of the United States as well as the economies of many other countries would benefit from some actions to conserve energy and use it much more efficiently. Energy costs would be reduced thus improving economic performance;
- Significant new economic growth opportunities are available in energy efficiency industries

and in the development of alternate renewable energy sources;

- Many leaders in business and industry are now calling for action on climate change because they realize that climate change impacts could adversely affect their businesses.

There will, however, be a need for some adjustment. This is why the U.S. bishops have advocated for targeting resources from climate change legislation to those most impacted including the low-income households who will need assistance with rising energy costs and to displaced workers as our economy moves away from fossil fuels toward alternative energy sources.

Couldn't proposed legislative remedies for climate change make the economic situation of the poor in developing countries even more wretched than it already is?

For the Catholic community, responsible proposals to address climate change must place a high priority on ensuring that the poor do not suffer economically. The Catholic Church has long been committed to reducing poverty and has supported sustainable economic development for the poor throughout the world through agencies such as Catholic Relief Services. We recognize that developing countries must have the capacity for economic growth so as to meet the needs of their poor. Developed countries should assist the least developed nations with a transition to more sustainable economic development including sharing new energy technology.

But doing nothing about climate change could be even more disastrous for poor people and nations than economic adjustments called for in reducing the use of fossil fuels.

Questions about climate change and the poor

Is the impact of global warming on the poor really going to be so much greater than what they're already dealing with?

The impacts of climate change will be superimposed on a world where already billions of people live in extreme poverty. The Millennium Development Project Task Force headed by Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs has recently documented the reality of current worldwide poverty in the [UN Millennium Project Report, 2005](#).

The scientific projections of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change indicate that the impacts on poor countries are going to get worse in the future. In addition, developing countries have more limited resources at their disposal than do the richer nations to take steps to respond to the challenges posed by climate change.

Doesn't the U.S. already give a lot of foreign aid to developing countries?

The international target for development assistance from the rich to the poor nations has for many

years been 0.7% of Gross National Product (GNP). Only a few of the smaller European countries have reached that level. Most industrialized countries are far from that goal. The United States contributes just 0.15% of its GNP. In addition to massive increases in development assistance, poverty reduction will require significant debt relief for impoverished countries and reorientation of the current distorted international trade rules to allow for greater access by poor countries to the markets of the wealthier nations. For years, the U.S. bishops have urged a significant increase in the amount of relief and development aid to least-developed countries and led efforts for worldwide debt relief for the poorest countries.

If we have many communities and people in our own country in need of assistance and economic aid, why should the United States be concerned with assistance to developing countries?

Developing countries have more limited resources at their disposal than do the richer nations to take steps to respond to the challenges posed by climate change. The IPCC report of 2007 offers the following analysis of the implications of climate change for the poor of developing nations:

- The impacts of climate change on poor communities will vary greatly but generally climate change will be superimposed on top of existing vulnerabilities that many developing countries face: access to drinking water, health of poor people, food security, loss of landmass in coastal areas is anticipated, and mass human migrations might be the only solution.
- The big challenge is to help developing countries find paths to sustainable economic development that do not replicate the same fossil-fuel dependent model that industrialized countries used with the consequent problem of climate change from high levels of carbon dioxide emissions.
- Vastly expanding the capacity of renewable energy sources is a big part of the long-term answer. China and India are making significant progress in this area particularly for the large numbers of poor in rural areas. But much more needs to be done.
- The wealthier industrialized countries need to provide much more assistance to help developing countries make the transition to a sustainable low-carbon energy future. It is in everyone's interest regardless where they live.

Energy price increases would come at a time when the cost of all goods, particularly food and basic necessities, would also increase. How would this support the poor and vulnerable?

There are ways to fold in new policy innovations to ensure that it is not harming those living in poverty and the vulnerable populations of the nation who bear the brunt of the costs. Religious leaders and groups believe that protection of the interests of the most vulnerable lies at the heart of policy discussions. In keeping with this, we support policies that are designed to incorporate these interests.

Incorporating and designing policies to protect the poor must address two potential outcomes of climate change policy: energy price increases and shifting job markets. In the face of energy price increases, the bishops recommend:

- Policies that would lower or reimburse energy costs of low-income people such as payroll tax reduction, an electronic benefits transfer card such the type used by the food stamp program for an energy rebate, or income tax credits and increasing LIHEAP program funding.
- Policies that could help reduce fossil fuel-based energy use by funding energy efficiency programs such as the Weatherization Assistance Program and assisting in the purchase of energy efficient appliances; removing barriers to renewable energy use, including the higher costs of renewable energy.

In the case of major shifts in the labor market, the bishops call for:

- Policies to encourage or fund training programs for employment in weatherization, solar water installation, renewable energy, and other alternative energy careers
- Policies to offer transition assistance for dislocated workers and communities.

What can I do?

We can all do something. We can pray – we must not underestimate its importance. We can find ways to reduce our own individual, family, and congregational energy use– that saves us money as well as contributing to reducing the causes of climate change. To the degree that we can contribute to charitable causes, we can give to relief and development agencies that work with the poor overseas and offer emergency assistance to low-income families at home.