

Vatican ambassador: Voluntary simplicity can slow climate change

By Dennis Sadowski, Editor

Columbus, OH: Every Catholic can do something about climate change by adopting a life of voluntary simplicity, believes the Vatican's ambassador to the United Nations.

It comes down to "working less, wanting less, spending less," thus reducing the impact each person has on the environment, Archbishop Celestino Migliore told the second in a series of regional Catholic conversations on climate change Saturday.

Citing Genesis' call to humanity to oversee creation and protect it and the church's social doctrine, the Vatican diplomat outlined the Holy See's position on the need for Catholics to heed the environmental dangers facing the planet.

"The denigration of the environment has become an inescapable reality," the archbishop said.

"There is no doubt that the latest assessment has established a strong connection between human activity and climate change," he said, referring to the February statement by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Archbishop Migliore acknowledged that although not all scientists agree that climate change is occurring, other environmental threats, such as indiscriminate deforestation, water pollution, the lack of potable water in parts of the world and depletion of fish stocks, demand action from the world community and individual Catholics alike.

"We need to drink deep from this frustrating foundation of knowledge and wisdom, known as the aggressive and progressive degradation of the environment, that has become an inescapable reality," he said.

Archbishop Migliore called God's placing of humans in the Garden of Eden with the instruction of not only taming nature, but keeping, or preserving, it as well. God's instruction was not so much a commandment but a blessing "to perfect, not destroy, the cosmos," he said.

Any steps to protect the environment must depend on more than the use of technology and traditional economics but also on "ethical, social and religious values as well," he said.

Likewise, any corrective steps require turning to people in the developing world, especially those living in dire poverty, and making decisions with their advice and consent, the papal nuncio said.

"With humans open to love, creation becomes the place for the mutual exchange of gifts among people," he said.

The Ohio conference was the second of three gatherings across the country to address the Catholic response to climate change. The first was in Florida last month and the third will be June 2 in Anchorage, Alaska.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is convening representatives from across a broad swatch of society for a sustained and thoughtful discussion on climate change. Saturday's 14 conference reflected that desire, with representatives from utility companies, a consumer group, environmental organizations, agriculture, higher education, state government, local parishes and diocesan social action offices on hand.

Daniel Misleh, executive director of the 10-month-old Catholic Coalition on Climate Change and a conference planner, said the bishops are looking to take steps that "make sense" and that are consistent with Catholic values.

The USCCB is a major supporter of the coalition along with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA, National Council of Catholic Women, National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Catholic Health Association of the United States.

"The public policy remedies are very complicated," Misleh said. "We're more in a mode of learning and listening instead of a mode of prescribing solutions."

He expects it will be at least six months before the bishops back any of the climate change bills pending in Congress.

Gov. Ted Strickland, a Democrat and a United Methodist minister, was on hand and briefly discussed his goals to reduce energy consumption throughout state government. In an interview, Strickland said, he has ordered energy audits of all state buildings with the goal of being an example for local governments, agencies, school districts and individual homeowners across the state.

"We can educate and inform people (about what needs to be done). It will take many small steps by many individuals," Strickland said.

"They're small steps, but if taken in a collective way, they can lead to significant results," he added. "No one person can take steps that are going to have a dramatic impact (climate change), but a lot of raindrops create an ocean."

As the third largest contributor of greenhouse gases in the United States, Ohio can take a leading role in reducing airborne pollutants that are said to be the primary cause of climate change, according to conference planners.

James Tobin, associate director for social concerns at the Catholic Conference of Ohio, is hoping the information that conference delegates obtained will be spread to parishes throughout the state.

At the same time, Tobin and others stressed the importance of addressing climate change because of its impact--which is already being felt--on the world's poor and other vulnerable people. That concern, repeated throughout Saturday, is rooted in the church's social teaching.

Marianist Sister Leanne Jablonski, director of the Marianist Environmental Education Center in Dayton, outlined a broad base of statistical information, ala Al Gore's Academy Award-winning documentary "An Inconvenient Truth," on sources of greenhouse gases and the implications of climate change. She painted a grim picture of Ohio's role in the climate change scenario.

Facts she offered include:

- * Since 1750, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased by 37 percent, corresponding to the industrial age.
- * The United States has less than 4 percent of the world's population but contributes 25 percent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions.
- * As the country's 11th largest state, Ohio has 4 percent of the U.S. population but produces 1 percent of the world's greenhouse gases annually.
- * Ohio is sixth in the U.S. in energy consumption; third in coal consumption and fourth in electricity usage.

Despite the grim realities, Sister Jablonski challenged the delegates to be hopeful while answering the call to care for God's creation.

Hope, she said, can be found in the sacred places of life, places where God can be found--a favorite garden, a park, a favorite childhood gathering place. In the same way, she tied sacramental life to the beauty of the environment--the clear waters of baptism, the grain and the fields that produces the bread of Eucharist and the dignity of farmworkers who harvest the grapes for wine.

"We have to live in solidarity and we have a responsibility to future generations," she said.

IDEAS ON HOW TO CONSERVE

The 120 delegates to the daylong Catholic Conversation on Climate Change had the chance to discuss in small groups ways to reduce energy consumption and the minimize their "environmental footprint" on the world. Among the ideas delegates promised to take back to their home parishes are:

- * Urge pastors to address environmental issues, especially climate change, from the pulpit as an essential teaching of the church.
- * Develop bulletin announcements as an educational tool.
- * Work to have an energy audit done on parish buildings and develop a plan to address ways to reduce energy consumption.
- * Include "green" practices in new parish buildings.
- * Encourage environmental education in parish schools.
- * Start a recycling program to recycle as many items as possible.

- * Change attitudes toward the environment.
- * Encourage simplified lifestyles and less consumerism.
- * Buy locally grown produce.
- * Use cleaning products that are environmentally friendly.
- * Use less bottled water or stop using it altogether.

CLIMATE CHANGE RESOURCES

Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, Daniel Misleh, executive director; 5727
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Catholic Conference of Ohio, Jim Tobin, associate director, 9 E. Long St., Suite 201,
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Diocesan Social Action Office, Leonard Calabrese, 7800 Detroit Ave., Cleveland, Ohio
44102; 216-939-3839; lxcalabrese@clevelandcatholiccharities.org.

Marianist Environmental Education Center, Sister Leanne Jablonski, director; St. Joseph
Hall, Mount St. John, 4435 E. Patterson Rd., Dayton, Ohio 45430-1095; 937-429-3582;
jablonski@udayton.edu

"Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good," 2001
statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops; available by calling 800-235-
8722