



## Department of Social Development and World Peace

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • FAX 202-541-3339

WEBSITE: [WWW.USCCB.ORG/SDWP](http://WWW.USCCB.ORG/SDWP)

February 7, 2007

The Honorable Harry Reid  
Majority Leader  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Reid:

At a time of growing and overdue attention to the challenges of global climate change, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops welcomes your leadership on this issue which literally affects the future of God's creation. The just released report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has outlined more clearly and more compelling than ever before the case for serious and urgent action to address the potential consequences of climate change as well as highlighting the dangers and costs of inaction.

As chairman of the Bishops' International Policy Committee, I urge you and your colleagues to focus on three central priorities in the debate and decisions to come:

- The practical demands of **prudence** which require wise action now to address problems that will grow in their magnitude and consequences;
- The pursuit of the **common good** rather than the demands of narrow interests;
- A **priority for the poor** who will bear the greatest burdens and pay the greatest price for the consequences and costs of climate change.

We are encouraged by the increasing signs of serious attention to climate change. President Bush addressed this matter in his State of the Union speech. Congress has begun a series of important hearings, and a variety of proposals are being put forward. We hope this will be a time for our nation to come together across partisan, ideological and interest groups lines to address the moral, human and environmental dimensions of this growing challenge that faces all of humanity.

In *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, the Catholic bishops of the United States insisted: "At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor 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.<sup>1</sup> It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us." I enclose a copy of our statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*.

The Honorable Harry Reid  
February 7, 2007  
Page Two

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops seeks to offer a constructive contribution to this timely and important national debate. We participate not as climate experts or as scientists, but rather as pastors and teachers who fear that the moral and human dimensions of these decisions will be overwhelmed by political, economic or ideological pressures. We ask you to take steps to address three major themes drawn from Catholic Social Teaching and our pastoral experience:

**A Priority for the Poor:** We are deeply concerned that the poor and vulnerable in our country and around the world will have little or no voice in this vital discussion. Their needs and burdens are likely to be ignored or overwhelmed by more powerful forces. Poor families and children, vulnerable workers, and farmers will likely be most impacted by climate change and bear the greatest burdens as we address its causes and consequences. The poor have the fewest resources and capacity to escape the costs of climate change. We all know too well who is left behind and who pays the greatest price when disaster, floods or droughts occur. The impact on poor communities and nations require priority attention as proposals for action are shaped and assessed.

**The Pursuit of the Common Good:** The challenge of 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 to you to help build up common ground for common action to advance the common good.

**The Practice of Prudence:** The IPCC report makes clear 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 21<sup>st</sup> century that would *very likely* be larger than those observed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century." (*Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis*, IPCC WGI Fourth Assessment Report, pp. 3 and 10, available at <http://www.ipcc.ch>). The traditional virtue of prudence suggests that we do not have to know with absolute certainty everything that is happening with climate change to know that something seriously harmful is occurring. Therefore, it is better to act now than wait until the problem gets worse and the remedies more costly. This precautionary principle leads us to act now to avoid the worst consequences of waiting. Prudence sometimes keeps us from acting precipitously. In this case, it requires us to act with urgency and seriousness.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will work with you and others to address global climate change within this framework and on these three principles. We do so with modesty and respect. While no one has easy answers, we ask you to help define and refine

The Honorable Harry Reid

February 7, 2007

Page Three

what prudence and the pursuit of the common good require. We seek your help in lifting up and focusing on how climate change will affect the “least among us”—the poor, the vulnerable and the voiceless in our country and around the world. We particularly seek your leadership in shaping responses that respect and protect the lives and the dignity of poor families and children.

We believe the moral measure of debate and decisions on climate change will be how we act with prudence to protect God’s creation, advance the “common good,” and mitigate the ways that climate change and its remedies burden the poor and the vulnerable.

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I thank you for your leadership on this very important and urgent moral priority.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the name.

Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski  
Bishop of Orlando  
Chairman, Committee on International Policy