

A Catholic Approach to Climate Change Question and Answer Resource

November 2007

This resource from the *Catholic Coalition on Climate Change* is intended to provide responses to frequently asked questions and challenging issues that are raised in the context of activities within 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.

- 'Our 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, the poor and 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 likely suffer its worst consequences. Throughout the Bible, God calls the people to care for the poor and vulnerable. Catholic teaching holds that we have a special obligation to respond to our brothers and sisters in need.

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 link it to the pro-life agenda. If scientific predictions come true, thousands of people (mostly poor people) could 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. Therefore it is wise to apply the virtue of prudence as defined in the recent World Day of Peace Message from Pope Benedict XVI:

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.

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; John 3:16)?

God gave us free will. We can choose between right and wrong. Just as we don't expect God to save us if we get into our car drunk and drive it recklessly, 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, including human beings, is a fundamental response to God's love.

(T)his question and the preceding one were addressed by Msgr. Pietro Parolin, of the Vatican Secretary of State, on September 25, 2007.

"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 of the Catholic Community 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 our grandchildren will inherit. Such worry can either paralyze us or motivate us to change. We need a vision of a future where we are living in a sustainable relationship with God's creation. We need to believe that such a future is possible and with God's help, it truly is. Through prayer, the sacraments and by working with others for positive solutions we can solve this problem.

Science Questions

Don't scientists disagree about climate change?

We hear that there are still some scientists who question the degree to which climate change is human-induced. Those voices are fewer and fewer. 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 definitively caused by human activities. The U.S. National Academy of Sciences has issued numerous consensus statements on climate change (e.g. [http://nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005 .pdf](http://nationalacademies.org/onpi/06072005.pdf)) 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?

Scientists have been able to determine that 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 quite 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 278ppm. That level did not vary more than 7ppm during the 800 years between 1000 and 1800 A.D. Atmospheric levels of CO₂ in 1958 were 315ppm and have increased to 378 ppm (2004), an increase of 100ppm or 36% due to human activities. The IPCC projects its levels could reach 450ppm by 2050.

Additionally, there is a close parallel between the current increases in CO₂ levels in the atmosphere and the increases in the global average temperature of the atmosphere. Scientists also know that the make-up of atmospheric CO₂ comes from the burning of fossil fuels because of the isotopes that can only come from such burning. The use of fossil fuels has risen dramatically in western countries since the industrial revolution and also is increasing now among large developing nations. Scientists have concluded that human use of fossil fuels has increased the levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere thereby in turn leading to a warmer atmosphere and climate changes.

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 do project a range of impacts from a warmer atmosphere. In some areas, including in various regions in the United States it is possible that crop production will be stimulated, especially in northern areas. 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 by and large regions where people are already living with serious malnutrition such as many areas in Africa, South-east Asia, and small island states.

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 Inter-governmental 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 northern latitudes are currently experiencing dramatic warming 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 on CO₂—will result in an uneven division of costs and benefits. 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. Designed another way, such legislation could significantly increase costs for energy consumers hitting the poor the hardest. How can religious leaders support legislation where only a very few benefit or create severe economic stress for the poorest families at home and abroad?

It is true that **if a cap-and-trade** program is designed incorrectly, it could provide windfalls to the rich but harm the poor. But religious leaders, including John Can of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, testified in June 2007 to request that Congress design a program that avoids this scenario, addresses the urgent need to forestall global warming, ensures that new resources are generated and allocated to protect the poor at home and overseas from the worst consequences of climate change and provides for workers displaced by restrictions on emissions.

Surely communities of faith have no role in such a politically charged issue as climate change. What about separation of church and state?

Climate change is a political issue because it **impacts** the common good. There will need to be changes in our society in such areas as energy use, transportation, lifestyles. Many individuals, businesses and politicians are resisting such changes because they benefit from the way things are now or will feel economic impacts as we move to a new energy economy. 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?

Changes called for by climate change need not be threatening. Many of the changes made for ecological reasons would have economic benefits and be “win-win” strategies. For instance, we would save money with efficiency improvements in appliances and cars by using less energy. If our public transit were improved significantly we could use our cars less, traffic congestion would be reduced and air quality improved. Many of the needed changes would be life-enhancing rather than diminishing.

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

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.

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 huge numbers 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 USA 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.

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 changes and challenges. Some sacrifice may be required but the principle of solidarity may demand those of us with more than our share to demonstrate a willingness to do with less.

- 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.
- Prudence—not needing to know everything with absolute certainty before we begin to act—ought to dictate that we need to do something to help ensure the future.
- 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.

All of this said, there will 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. We recognize that developing countries must have the capacity for economic growth so as to meet the needs of their poor. Developing countries should assist the least developed nations with a transition to more sustainable economic development including sharing new energy technology.

Questions about climate change and the poor

How can I be expected to care about climate change and the poor in developing countries when I feel enormous financial pressures in my own life?

We can all do something. We can pray — we must not underestimate its importance. We can find ways to reduce our own 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.

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 reality of current world-wide poverty has been recently documented by the Millennium Development Project Task Force headed by Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs. (UN Millennium Project Report, 2005 available at: <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/who/index.htm>)

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 world-wide debt relief for the poorest countries.

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.

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.

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

- We should not ignore the enormous economic costs of not taking action to reduce 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 actions to address climate change.
- The economy of the United States as well as the economies of many other countries will likely benefit from actions to conserve energy and use it much more efficiently. Energy costs would be reduced thus improving economic performance;
- Money invested in energy conservation and energy efficiency yields a much higher proportion of jobs per dollar invested than expanding energy supply;
- Significant new economic growth opportunities are available in energy efficiency industries and in the development of alternate renewable energy sources;

Energy price increases would come at a time when the cost of all goods, particularly food and basic necessities, would also increase. How does the Catholic community propose to 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 shrinking job markets.
- In the face of energy price increases, the bishops recommend:

- o Policies that would lower or reimburse energy costs such as payroll tax reduction, or income tax credits and increasing LIIFAP program funding.
 - o 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 and energy efficient homes; removing barriers to renewable energy use, including costs.
- In the case of major shifts in the labor market, the bishops call for:
 - o Policies to encourage or fund training programs for employment in weatherization, solar water installation, renewable energy. and other alternative energy careers
 - o Policies to offer transition assistance for dislocated workers and communities.