



UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Reflection on Climate Change and Environmental Stewardshipⁱ
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Good afternoon. I am happy to be with you, Catholic leaders and public health officials, to share a day of reflection and conversation on stewardship of the environment and the proposed carbon standards. I thank you for the warm reception and your willingness to be here and participate today.

I would like to begin my remarks, and perhaps give some structure to our time, by taking note of an important and common thread for most of us gathered together here. We have chosen to come at the issue of stewardship of the environment from a Catholic perspective. Many of your groups claim an affiliation with our faith, and some of us are explicitly charged with carrying out this work on behalf of the Church. All of us seem to recognize something of importance in a Catholic connection.

If this identification with Catholicism means anything for us, we must ask ourselves what that meaning should be. Plenty of organizations advocate for environmental issues; there are no shortage of educational programs and interest groups talking about the environment and climate change. To qualify our work as something “Catholic” is to—consciously or not—draw in something unique about our place in the dialogue.

If this is true – and I think it is – then my reflection this afternoon will benefit by an examination of that unique contribution. Indeed, this will serve as the first main theme for our conversation today. From this foundation, I then want to place our dialogue about climate change and the proposed carbon standards within that framework, the framework of a faith-infused approach to stewardship of the environment.

I am a Catholic bishop, obviously. You would not be surprised, I imagine, to learn that I am regularly called upon to consider what it means for the Church and her people to engage the world. Our faith is so rich and our social thought so extensive that the Catholic Church has much to say about most everything affecting the human person.

Let us pause for a moment and consider that truth. The Church has much to say *precisely because* so many things in our world affect the human person. As Catholics—

whether we are speaking about economic issues, immigration, poverty, incarceration or the environment—we speak and act because human beings, their well-being and flourishing toward their proper end, hang in the balance.

My point may sound simple, but it's worth pondering. The Catholic *should* care deeply about an effective and efficient economic system that meets the needs of people as much as possible. Even so, the Church's teaching in this area is concerned primarily with the degree to which that economic system is truly at the service of the human person, and the extent to which the economy creates conditions for us to thrive precisely as created daughters and sons, made in the image and likeness of a loving and merciful God. This is why a purely economic analysis of the worth of individuals, or collectivist ideas that leave aside the inherent dignity of the human person cannot fit in a Catholic worldview.

Immigration, a present and serious reality in many parts of the world, admits of the same dynamics. A Catholic must care about the security of her nation and the laws that govern the conduct of the people within and among particular states. The Church recognizes this as an important principle, but a principle based on the common good and the reality that security and the reliable enforcement of law help to create conditions for stability and human development. The Church doesn't stop there in her teaching, however. The Catholic should also be concerned with the right of all people to seek conditions that support survival in the face of unbearable threats to livelihood and safety. The Church calls nations to meet the challenges of immigration with mercy, love and justice, recognizing our connectedness as sons and daughters of a loving creator in formulating policy or adapting to immigration crises. Catholic teaching on immigration is clearly centered on the human person and the common good in all its considerations.

I don't need to go further down the list of the pressing issues of our day to make my point clearer. In our care of creation, the Church is, not surprisingly, consistent. The Catholic conception of stewardship of the environment is also rooted in the dignity of the human person and his relationship with God. This relationship finds its origin for us, "in the beginning."

The book of Genesis is meant to draw us into God's creative activity. We should reflect on the Holy Spirit moving mightily over the waters, and God setting into motion powerful and dynamic effects; from nothing—an idea we can't even grasp—comes a great tidal wave of activity, an unfathomable but ordered, clearly ordered, creation. What must that have looked like, this incredible masterwork of motion and formation? Perhaps we will be granted a glimpse of it in the life hereafter.

The inspired Word found in Genesis should capture our attention on another point, too. As God ordered creation, set into motion the laws of nature and adorned the universe with diverse and stunning species, he made our first parents out of the very earth he would set them over as caretakers. Genesis 2:7 tells us that God formed Adam "out of the dust of the ground."

Adam's body was intimately connected with the Earth. Though God was capable of making him from nothing, he chose to use the materials that he had already created as part of his earlier work to make the first human being. What should strike us about God's choice here is that he intended a clear intertwining and interconnectedness of our physical well-being and the condition of the environment from which we were formed. This foundational concept ties our care for the world to our first moments in history, and we ought not neglect that our responsibilities originate here, at the dawn of time.

Our contemplation must not stop at this point, of course. Adam and Eve were not simply created things among many others. When God breathed the breath of life, something of his own spirit, into them, we learn that human beings, unlike other things, were "made in [his] image, after [his] likeness" (Gen 1:26). It is not by accident that scripture points us to a set-apart mode of creation, to an aspect of the human person that is exalted in the created order. When Adam and Eve were placed in the center of the garden, God saw that his work was *very good*, indeed.

Lest we doubt this, God provides us with a great charge, the basis for our understanding of our role in caring for what has been entrusted to us:

. . . "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen 1:26-28).

At that moment we began to wrestle with concepts of stewardship and dominion. Human beings contended with the careful balance of developing the gifts of the natural order for human thriving with the preservation and protection of those gifts in responsible ways for the good of all people and future generations.

These themes are as important for us as they were for Adam and Eve, perhaps more so given the dimness with which we see our place in God's plan after the Fall. In our work for an authentic stewardship of the earth, we must balance these key concepts rooted in our religious belief, in particular *stewardship*, *dominion*, and *human ecology*.

Stewardship can seem an elusive term these days. For the Catholic, it often evokes uncomfortable images of the collection basket and the bishop's annual appeal. Still, we really must understand the ecological stewardship God intends for us in order to make our work meaningful. We connect with my earlier point that the Church cares about these matters *precisely because* the human person and his proper end are in the balance.

Stewardship implies a commission to care for something that is not our own. For every gift we receive, be it intellectual, physical, environmental, we are charged to look after it for the good of another. Primarily, all is a gift from God, for his glory and honor; we steward all on his behalf. Secondly, the gifts entrusted to our care are for the good of human beings according to God's plan, to be cultivated and used responsibly for the development of the human person toward his eternal reward.

A critical misunderstanding that can take our stewardship of any gift astray is the idea that the thing stewarded is nurtured for its own sake. In the case of money, focus on wealth for wealth's sake has wrought evils, individual and communal, throughout the history of mankind, including poverty that cries out to God for justice. The same is true of power in public affairs. If not used for the common good, those governed typically pay the heavy price for the pursuit of unbridled power.

For our natural environment, we must resist any idea that the goods of the earth inhabit some disordered place above and apart from the human race. When we begin to see human beings as blight, as a force to be resisted rather than nurtured by our care of the environment, then we have upended God's plan and his purpose in placing us at the center of his earthly creative action. Human beings may act in ways that critically wound our natural ecology, and we must combat these approaches. By placing nature above the good of the human person, however, we risk abandoning the project of changing hearts toward something greater.

Our stewardship should always seek out the divine reflection that dwells in us. God calls us to a particular balance; any good steward endeavors to act, as closely as possible, as his or her master would act in his place, at least if the steward hopes to keep his job. Pope Francis, in his General Audience of May 21 of this year, expressed it well: "Creation is not some possession that we can lord over for our own pleasure; nor, even less, is it the property of only some people, the few: creation is a gift, it is the marvelous gift that God has given us, so that we will take care of it and harness it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude."

In this balance, dominion over the earth is not reckless development, but calls us most profoundly to responsible cultivation for the good of all. You and I should marvel that our Almighty God chose us to be "co-creators," to be the means by which the raw resources found around us may be gathered together, nurtured and harnessed for the benefit of everybody. Of all the earthly creatures, only we have this clear role. The Catechism reflects on the magnitude of this relationship:

To human beings God even gives the power of freely sharing in his providence by entrusting them with the responsibility of "subduing" the earth and having dominion over it. God thus enables men to be intelligent and free causes in order to complete the work of creation, to perfect its harmony for their own good and that of their neighbors. Though often unconscious collaborators with God's will,

they can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers and their sufferings. They then fully become "God's fellow workers" and co-workers for his kingdom (CCC, 307).

In Genesis, God points out to Adam and Eve the seed-producing plant and fruit-producing tree, also with its seeds. Humans are to employ work, which they did not mind so much before the Fall, to help the things of creation reach greater levels of perfection for the benefit of the human race. It is true that this task became more difficult after we left the Garden, and that, even now, we are tempted by inclinations that cause us to devastate the richness of creation and squander the gifts meant to provide for our well-being. With grace and a view toward our proper duties as stewards of the dynamic treasures in our care, we can meet our responsibilities with joy and balance.

A word about the term "human ecology" as we transition from discussion of our theological roots to consideration of climate change and the proposed carbon emission standards. As many of you know, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, affectionately referred to as the "green Pope," had much to say about the interconnectedness of the natural and human ecologies. We look forward to Pope Francis' forthcoming encyclical which will continue the Church's important thought in this area.

In Pope Benedict's well-known Message on the 2010 World Day of Peace, he placed the environmental considerations of the day squarely within the richness of Catholic thought. Quoting, in part, from *Caritas in Veritate*, he wrote:

The Church has a responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction. The degradation of nature is closely linked to the cultural models shaping human coexistence: consequently, "when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits."

With this view in mind, we consider climate change generally, and the proposed carbon emission standards specifically. The Church is interested in these matters because of the tradition we just outlined, and because she is what Pope Benedict described as an "expert in humanity," even if she is not a technical expert.

The climate is a good worthy of our study and protection. We know that humans *do* impact their environment, and can do so with devastating results if not acting with due regard for their activity. The degree of human effect on climate change is hotly debated and has now become, unfortunately, a politicized issue. But we must put aside this polarization in favor of approaches and solutions that serve the common good and preserve the precious gifts entrusted to us.

In writing about Saint John Paul II's call for a renewed solidarity, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI wrote:

[H]is appeal is all the more pressing today, in the face of signs of a growing crisis which it would be irresponsible not to take seriously. Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of “environmental refugees,” people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it – and often their possessions as well – in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources? All these are issues with a profound impact on the exercise of human rights, such as the right to life, food, health and development.

We cannot ignore the weight of scientific thought before us on climate change. There is no excuse for inaction in our stewardship given this. Our scientific knowledge changes, deepens and grows by the day. Our understanding of the human effects on climate will likewise increase. Still, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church points us to the virtue of prudence when approaching the question of our impact on the natural ecology, namely the “precautionary principle,” whereby policy-makers consider all the risks and alternatives in deciding when and how to act (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 469). While leaving room for deeper knowledge in the future, we must do what appears right *today* for the common good and the good of the human person, particularly those who are impacted most severely by climatological change, the poor.

With these most vulnerable in mind, I wrote a letter to the Environmental Protection Agency with my brother bishop, Bishop Pates, Chair of the International Justice and Peace Committee, in July of this year. In it, we applauded the concept of a national carbon emission standard, while recognizing the importance of flexibility for the individual states. We wrote:

The best evidence indicates that power plants are the largest stationary source of carbon emissions in the United States, and a major contributor to climate change. Power plants have often been located near low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Air pollution from these plants contributes to health problems, especially in the young and the elderly. These problems include: increased risk of premature death and heart attacks; increased incidence and severity of asthma; and other health effects. These standards would significantly reduce carbon pollution from power plants; they would also reduce particle

pollution, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, which have been linked to important human and environmental health problems.

We are also reminded that action for the common good in these areas must be guided by the important principles offered by Catholic social teaching, so that regulation and solutions might truly serve the human person toward full flourishing. I welcome the representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency here today, and am thankful for our opportunity to visit at the EPA later today to discuss these issues.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be with you at this gathering. I look forward to a robust discussion about the proposed carbon emission standards and the possible next steps as we all endeavor to be good stewards of God's abundant gifts.

ⁱ Archbishop Thomas G. Wenski, "Climate Change and Environmental Stewardship," *Origins* Volume Number: 44 Issue Number: 23 (November 6, 2014): Pages 385-389.