

**G20 Religious Leaders' Summit
Pittsburgh
Press Conference Remarks
September 23, 2009**

I am Stephen M. Colecchi, Director of the Office of International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Bishops' Conference is grateful for this opportunity to join with our friends in the wider religious community to highlight some essential moral messages as the leaders of the G20 nations gather here in Pittsburgh. It is especially good to be here with Bishop William Winter and the Church and people of Pittsburgh.

In Catholic teaching every person is created in the image of God. For this reason, the U.S. bishops have reaffirmed a major priority to protect the life and dignity of the human person, both in our nation and around the world.

The welfare of Pittsburgh, our nation, and the world are linked. As Pope Benedict XVI recently taught, "Through support for economically poor countries ... not only can true economic growth be generated, but a contribution can be made towards sustaining the productive capacities of rich countries..." (*Caritas in Veritate*, June 2009)

It is fitting that the G-20 leaders reconvene here in Pittsburgh. In many ways this proud city represents both impressive economic achievements and the struggles of working families. In and beyond Pittsburgh and our own nation, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in hunger and poverty.

Up to 2006, there had been progress in reducing global poverty. From 1990 to 2005, the number of people living in extreme poverty dropped from 1.8 to 1.4 billion. Likewise the proportion of undernourished children declined from 33% in 1990 to 26% in 2006.

But as a result of high food prices in 2007 and 2008 and the onset of the global economic crisis last year, the World Bank estimates that the number of people in extreme poverty in developing countries has risen by more than 200 million. This year per capita incomes have declined for the first time in a decade in sub-Saharan Africa. And for the first time in history, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that more than one billion people are suffering from hunger.

Beyond the statistics, poverty has a face. It's the face of anguished parents helplessly watching their children languish in hunger. It's the gaunt faces of people dying at an early age, ravaged by preventable diseases. It's the desperate faces of hardworking farmers laboring in vain to coax a harvest from fields devastated by drought or floods related to climate shifts. It's the languid faces of children whose growth is stunted and whose education is permanently impaired.

Hungry and poor people in the United States and around the world are being hit the hardest by double trouble: the global economic crisis and the looming climate change crisis.

As the Presidents of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the G8 nations wrote in June:

“Ironically poor people have contributed the least to the economic crisis facing our world, but their lives and livelihoods are likely to suffer the greatest devastation.... [P]oor countries and peoples who have contributed the least to the human factors driving global climate change are most at risk of its harmful consequences.”

In a letter prior to the G20 meeting in London, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

“The current crisis has raised the spectre of the cancellation or ... reduction of external assistance programmes, especially for Africa and ... less developed countries [But] [d]evelopment aid, including ... the cancellation of the external debt of the poorest and most indebted countries, has not been the cause of the crisis and, out of fundamental justice, must not be its victim.”

Poverty has many faces, but it also has a solution. We need to ask: How can our world’s leaders protect the life and dignity of all God’s children? How will the G-20’s plans for economic recovery and climate change help working families in our own nation and poor families around the world to feed themselves and lift themselves out of poverty?