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Global Climate Change



At its core, global climate change is not simply about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. Rather, global climate change 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. It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us.

Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good
--U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2001

What is distinctive about a Catholic approach to climate change?

The Catholic Church brings a distinctive and authentic perspective to the debate about climate change by lifting up the moral dimensions of this issue and the needs of the most vulnerable among us. This unique contribution is rooted in our religious teaching and applies traditional moral values to new ethical challenges. For us this concern for the environment and duty to care for creation is not new. It did not begin with Earth Day, but with Genesis itself. As Catholics our faith calls us to care for *all* of God's creation, especially the 'least of these' (Mt 25:40). Of particular concern to the Church is how climate change and the response to it will affect poor and vulnerable people here at home and around the world.

Is there sufficient scientific evidence that climate change is occurring?

As the bishops declared in their 2001 statement on global climate change, "we accept the consensus findings of so many scientists and conclusions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)." Significant levels of scientific consensus demonstrate that climate change is real and that the consequences of inaction are serious. As stated in USCCB testimony before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, prudence "suggests that while we may not know everything about global climate change we know that something significant is occurring. We do not have to know everything to know that human activity is contributing to significant changes in the climate with serious consequences for both the planet and for people, especially those who are poor and vulnerable."

Why a focus on the poor? How can climate change policies treat poor families fairly?

Because our faith demands it and the facts require it. Those who live in poverty are most likely to suffer the worst consequences of climate change though they contribute the least and have the fewest resources to adapt and respond. Although necessary climate change policies will have social and economic impacts, well-designed climate change policies can both help address climate change and act to protect the poor and vulnerable. Most policy and legislative approaches to address climate change will generate substantial revenue by putting a price on carbon emissions. The United States bishops insist that a significant portion of these resources be used to minimize the disproportionate burdens for those least able to cope with the impacts of climate change and policies to address it. This includes low-income communities in the United States, people living in poverty within poorer nations, and vulnerable populations including the elderly, children and workers within older industries.

How can you protect low-income individuals and working families in the United States from increases in energy prices resulting from climate policy?

Policy makers should set aside an adequate percentage of the revenue generated through climate policy to fund climate rebates that would give money back to the poorest individuals and families to help offset the impact of higher energy costs resulting from climate legislation. This requires targeting assistance to low-income individuals and families to help offset the impact of higher energy costs including utility, transportation and other associated costs. Existing programs and mechanisms such as the Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program (SNAP), the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the electronic benefit transfer card (EBT) and other means can be used to target and deliver this rebate to those most in need.

Why should the United States help poor people in the most vulnerable developing nations deal with climate change?

Wealthier nations such as the United States, who have played a disproportionate role in causing climate change, have a moral responsibility to help poor people in the most vulnerable developing nations adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change. As stated in USCCB testimony, “The real ‘inconvenient truth’ is that those who contribute least to climate change will be affected the most and have the least capacity to cope or escape.” Even in the face of climate change, poor countries still have a basic right to develop sustainably and people in these countries have a right to live with dignity and not in poverty. The bishops’ conference calls on Congress to use the needed revenue generated through climate policy to help poor people in the most vulnerable developing nations adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Why take strong steps to address climate change, if they are likely to hurt the poor and vulnerable?

Climate change will affect all of us, especially the poor and vulnerable. The environmental, social and economic costs of inaction – doing nothing to address climate change – are too high for all of us. The IPCC concluded in its 2007 Fourth Assessment Report that the costs of climate change are likely to be significant and to increase over time as average global temperature increases. As the physical effects of climate change increase so do the human costs and economic costs of dealing with climate change. As the bishops emphasized in their 2001 statement, “Inaction and inadequate or misguided responses to climate change will likely place even greater burdens on already desperately poor peoples.” Furthermore, the widely respected *Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change* concluded that “the benefits of strong and early action far outweigh the economic costs of not acting.”

Who is the Catholic Church working with to address climate change?

To ensure that the USCCB’s primary concern for poor and vulnerable people is reflected in future climate policies it has worked closely with both interfaith and Catholic partners, including the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) and the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change (CCCC). NRPE seeks to bring a common religious voice to environmental issues. The CCCC, a common effort of national Catholic organizations and the USCCB, encourages a more thoughtful dialogue about ways the Catholic community can respond to climate change. The USCCB is also in dialogue with environmental and business groups, drawing their attention to the moral dimensions of climate change and its impacts on the poor.

What can I do?

Take the *St. Francis Pledge to Protect Creation and the Poor*. In April 2009 the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change will launch a unique new initiative offering a distinctively Catholic perspective on global climate change. This initiative offers Catholics an opportunity to honor God’s creation and to stand with people living in poverty, in our nation and around the world, facing the worst impacts of climate change. To learn more go to http://www.catholicsandclimatechange.org/coalition_activities/covenant.html.

For further information: contact Cecilia Calvo, USCCB, 202-541-3188, ccalvo@usccb.org