



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

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Climate: A Common Good

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"The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all."
-- Pope Francis, "Laudato Si," (23)

EXPERIENCE

When representatives from Catholic organizations from around the world gathered in Rome in early May to coordinate a meaningful response to Pope Francis' anticipated moral call to action on climate change, the voices calling out for attention extended well beyond the 40 people in the meeting room.

Catholic humanitarian assistance and development organizations brought with them stories of communities whose advances in reducing extreme poverty were wiped out by extreme weather events. Advocates from Africa worried aloud about how climate change will heighten food insecurity. Three Brazilian bishops lamented the destruction of "our home" and stressed the importance of building lifestyles around relationships with one another and with Earth instead of around individualism and consumerism.

As someone who works with the Sisters of Mercy, I carried in my heart the pleas for climate action by sisters in the Philippines who helped villagers rebuild after devastating typhoons veered off their usual course and caught communities off-guard. I also had in mind an Argentinian sister's warnings about disappearing glaciers that downstream populations rely on for drinking and agriculture. And I was thinking of a sister in Micronesia who described how the rising ocean level was noticeably diminishing the size of some of the Pacific nation's islands, forcing some residents to relocate.

Since returning from that Rome meeting, scientific reports have pointed to evidence that additional suffering is on the way: more intense heat waves, melting arctic sea ice and a sinking ice shelf in the Antarctic, underground water sources being depleted at unsustainable rates, an

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alarming loss of species. These are all at least partly attributed to or exacerbated by climate change, scientists tell us.

Pope Francis acknowledges many of these signs and their cause in the first chapter of his recent encyclical, "Laudato Si'." "It is true that there are other factors [at work], yet a number of scientific studies indicate that most global warming in recent decades is due to the great concentration of greenhouse gases ... released mainly as a result of human activity," he writes.

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SOCIAL ANALYSIS

While its very name indicates that global warming impacts every living creature on Earth, it is clear that the poor who contributed the least to the problem are being and will continue to be affected the most.

They include “climate refugees” -- those displaced by sea-level rise, desertification claiming once-arable land, and conflicts over food and water. Some researchers at the National Academy of Sciences are partly attributing the unrest in Syria to stresses that built up in cities after a long climate-induced drought caused crop failures that pushed as many as 1.5 million people from rural to urban areas. A Catholic Relief Services study shows that small farmers in Central America will face reduced maize and bean yields, which could result in widespread hunger. And in Africa, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has connected climate change to increased incidences of malaria and decreased productivity of fisheries, fruit-bearing trees, and wheat and maize farming.

The Catholic humanitarian and development alliances CIDSE and Caritas Internationalis have made a clear link between climate change, environmental deterioration, and poverty. A joint November 2014 report places most blame on fossil energy consumption, propped up by unjust social structures. Not only are people who are poor most impacted by climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions, but their communities are also most likely to be impacted by the pollution, noise, and health hazards associated with extractive practices themselves.

REFLECTION

In “Laudato Si,” Pope Francis calls for strong and immediate international collaboration to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable on our planet today and the needs of future generations. That includes “redefining our notion of progress” to ensure that development improves people’s quality of life and falls within Earth’s capacity, rather than feeds the appetites of financial markets and corporate shareholders. And it includes enforceable agreements to limit greenhouse gas concentration in the atmosphere and adequate financing to assist impoverished countries with developing renewable energy technologies that will improve standards of living.

The pope also calls for national and local policies that root out corruption, eliminate the negative effects of production processes, and promote best practices such as the development of renewable energy sources that ensure communities’ self-sufficiency.

Pope Francis invites all of us, though, to be part of the solution to climate change and environmental deterioration and to address the plight of the poor who are disproportionately impacted by both. He invites us to consider how our lifestyles—as individuals and as part of communities where we live, work, and worship—impact Earth and persons living in poverty. He talks about the different decisions we could make, whether through our purchasing power or energy conservation measures.

“There is a nobility in the duty to care for creation through little daily actions,” he writes. “We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknownst to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread.”

ACTION

- Assemble a group to discuss Pope Francis’ encyclical using a guide developed by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops at usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/laudato-si-discussion-guide.pdf.
- Sign the Global Catholic Climate Movement (GCCM) petition, which calls on world leaders at the United Nations climate talks in Paris in December to “drastically cut carbon emissions to keep the global temperature rise below the dangerous threshold of 1.5°C, and to aid the world’s poorest in coping with climate change impacts.” Find it at: catholicclimatemovement.global/petition/.
- Join with Catholics Confront Global Poverty in urging members of Congress to support President Obama’s request for \$500 million for the Green Climate Fund, an international fund to assist poor nations with adaptation to climate change and mitigation of its effects. Take action at: tinyurl.com/nnm2hx7.
- Form a Creation Care Team in your parish, workplace or community residence with resources from the Catholic Climate Covenant. Learn more at: www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/partners/creation_care_teams.
- Consider simple steps from the Environmental Protection Agency that you can take to reduce your reliance on fossil fuels at www.epa.gov/climatechange/wycd/index.html.
- Find out how coal- or gas-intensive your utility is, at Clean Energy Action, cleanenergyaction.org/. Then invite your city council person to have coffee and ask her/him to write a letter to the utility asking for more reliance on clean energy. Resources available from marie@catholicnetwork.us.