

ELECTION 2008: Voting the Common Good

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Climate Change and the Global Common Good

I. Introduction

As the drama of the Presidential campaign season continues to unfold in newspaper headlines and television spots, another drama, far greater in scope, is unraveling in the backdrop. The devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast regions of Louisiana and Mississippi in 2005, the 2006 release of former Vice President Al Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, and most recently, the record rainfall and flooding in Iowa and the Midwest, have done much to raise awareness of the reality of climate change for the U.S. public. Building on this growing consciousness, the 2008 election cycle creates a vital window of opportunity for a national discussion on this pressing issue: what does climate change mean for the U.S. as a country and as a member of the international community confronted by a common global ecological crisis?

In his 1987 encyclical, Pope John Paul II recognized the growing interconnected nature of the world, saying: "Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 26). Taken within the context of evolving climate change, a new layer of urgency is added to his admonition. The atmosphere is a shared good that transcends national borders, binding the earth community to a common future. Its fragile balance has been disturbed by unrestrained emissions of greenhouse gases, leading to dangerous warming trends and shifting weather patterns. Although the immediate results are local in effect, the crisis is global in scope, and the solutions must therefore be global as well. In order to avert disaster, all countries must be partner to a forward-looking solution, although, as a question of fairness and responsibility, industrialized nations, including the U.S., have a particular moral obligation to act.

While the Presidential candidates have acknowledged climate change as an important concern, they have not gone far enough in recognizing the urgency or the global poverty and justice dimensions of the problem. By the reckoning of most climate experts, the point of dangerous climate change has passed. Both domestically and globally, its devastating impacts are already being felt. As the nation with both the largest per capita and the largest historical emissions of greenhouse gases, the U.S. has waited far too long for action. Whoever is elected in November must have a plan in place upon taking office, not simply in regards to domestic emissions reductions and future energy security, but to support vulnerable communities at home and abroad through the climatic shifts that are now inevitable, and to constructively re-engage the country in international climate negotiations.

II. State of the Crisis

Global climate change is the variation in the Earth's weather patterns over time. While natural variation does occur, the current trend of global warming, or the significant increase in average temperatures globally, is caused by human activities, specifically the emissions of greenhouse gases through the burning of fossil



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fuels since the beginning of the industrial era. Greenhouse gases, the most prominent being carbon dioxide, are so-called because they trap heat within the Earth's atmosphere. While a certain concentration is necessary to support life on Earth, too high a level can raise overall temperatures with disastrous results. The concentration of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere, currently at 385 parts per million (ppm), is now greater than at any time in the last twenty million years.

Over the last century, average global temperatures have risen a seemingly inconsequential 1.3° Fahrenheit (0.7° Celsius), according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).¹ Yet even such small temperature changes have led to disproportionately larger impacts, and the rate of warming is increasing, with 11 of the past 12 years among the warmest since 1850. The fallout from this trend of warming is being documented around the globe from extended drought in the Sahel to melting of glacial ice caps in the Andes, from more intense Atlantic hurricanes to rising sea levels displacing the populations of small Pacific island states.

Climate change is already dangerous, as these impacts testify, but to avoid reaching the tipping point towards catastrophic change, average global temperature rise must be kept below 3.6°F (2°C). Beyond that threshold, climate change will rapidly spin out of control through self-reinforcing feedback loops. According to NASA climatologist James Hansen, "[i]f we go over the edge, we will transition to an environment far outside the range that has been experienced by humanity, and there will be no return within any foreseeable future generation."² That edge, the point of no return, is 450 ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, a concentration that will be achieved within two or three decades if no significant action is taken to reign in emissions. More recent studies by Hansen suggest that the tipping point may have in fact been around 350 ppm, and every year spent above that level further increases the likelihood of irreparable harm.

III. Climate Change and the Global Common Good

Within Catholic Social Teaching, the common good refers to the conditions of social living that allow each individual to attain his or her own fulfillment. The principle has generally been elaborated in terms of the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of human wellbeing; however the reality of climate change undergirds the importance of an ecological component as well. Clean air, healthful food, safe water, and a stable climate – all these things are also fundamental to human life and fulfillment. As Pope John Paul II asserted in his *1990 World Day of Peace Message*, "world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of *due respect for nature*" (1).

From the opening pages of Genesis, the innate goodness of creation is affirmed: "And God saw everything that s/he had made, and behold, it was very good" (*1990 World Day of Peace Message*, Gen 1:31). Pope John Paul II upholds that "*the aesthetic value of creation cannot be overlooked*. Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity. The Bible speaks again and again of the goodness and beauty of creation, which is called to glorify God" (*1990 World Day of Peace Message*, 14). Thus, the natural world is not only inherently good, but also has a specific purpose to which it was intended, glorifying God through its beauty, unity and complexity.

Humankind is assigned to till and to tend, caring for the balance of creation and promoting its continuing development, "like a garden that is managed but not owned".⁴ However, "[t]he dominion granted to man/woman by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of a freedom to 'use and misuse,' or to dispose of things as one pleases. . . . [W]hen it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 34).

The goods of creation are entrusted to humanity as a whole, not excluding anyone, and therefore intended also to support the basic human dignity and fulfillment of all people and future generations. "[T]he earth is ultimately *a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all*. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, 'God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 69). . . . It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence" (*1990 World Day of Peace Message*, 8).

The human community then is tasked with a two-fold responsibility: the promotion of the integrity and order of creation, and the just distribution of its bounty, concretely linking the fate of the environment to the fate of humanity. Pope John Paul II points out that the reckless exploitation of resources is ultimately to the detriment of humankind, even if carried out in the name of progress and development. "Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man/woman" (*1990 World Day of Peace*, 7). By focusing too narrowly on economic gain, "man/woman sets himself/herself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him/her" (*Centessimus Annus*, 37).

In response, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops emphasizes that, "the crisis is not only ecological, but moral and spiritual. A moral crisis must be met with conversion, which is a change in perspective, attitudes and behavior. Essentially, this conversion is aimed at the ruptures we have created with nature, with our neighbor and with God. It has to focus on re-establishing a relationship, that is, creating a climate of reconciliation" (*Our Relationship with the Environment: The Need for Conversion*). Restoration of socially just relations and care for creation must be parallel processes; neither goal can be accomplished alone.

Responsibility to strive for the common good extends not only within the human community, but to the complex web of life and systems that is the wider Earth community. In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II asserts that, "[t]he word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man/woman, created in the image of God, shares by his/her work in the activity of the Creator and that, within the limits of his/her own human capabilities, man/woman in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he/she advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation"(25). He echoes the Second Vatican Council emphasizing that such work not only affirms human dignity and contributes to earthly progress, but foreshadows the New Creation and arrival of the Kingdom (*Gaudium et Spes*, 39).

IV. Climate Change & Poverty

Worldwide, communities which already exist at society's margins, whether due to poverty or other social factors, are the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Although they have contributed little to and benefitted even less from the carbon emissions associated with industrialized economies, the consequences affect them first and most directly. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops maintains that although some level of uncertainty may remain in climate predictions, enough is known to justify, even obligate, mitigating or preventive action, specifically because of its disproportionate and devastating impact on the poor.⁶

Climate change will most often compound other pre-existing and overlapping social stresses, including poverty, hunger, conflict, migration and the spread of HIV/AIDS, thereby increasing vulnerability and insecurity. The economies of many developing countries are heavily dependent on climate-sensitive industries, such as agriculture, fisheries, forestry and tourism, both in terms of livelihoods and income generation. Meanwhile, poor communities overall, according to the IPCC, are more limited in their abilities to adapt to climate change, and more reliant on local food and water systems that are predicted to be heavily impacted.⁷

Even within the United States, poor and socially-marginalized communities are more susceptible and have least access to recovery efforts. During the wildfires that swept southern California in October 2007, the presence of Border Guards at evacuation centers for the displaced caused many immigrants to avoid the shelters for fear of questions in regards to their immigration status.⁸ Moreover, studies conducted by the Congressional Research Service show that victims of Hurricane Katrina were more likely to be poor and African American and less likely to have access to resources to reestablish their lives after the storm.⁹

"Leaving the world's poor to sink or swim with their own meager resources in the face of the threat posed by climate change is morally wrong," writes Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, in the UN's *Human Development Report for 2007-2008*, "[but] this is precisely what is happening. We are drifting into a world of 'adaptation apartheid'." The World Bank estimates that at least \$10-40 billion per year are necessary to help poor countries adapt to climate change, covering a range of needs including disaster planning, adapting water and food systems, and addressing increased migration and conflict. Yet, so far, available funding lags far behind the need, with a mere \$300 million pledged by the international community.

Although the U.S. remains the only industrialized nation to have failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on emission reductions, it is a party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Under the UNFCCC, 'Annex 1' (industrialized) countries (including the U.S.) have made legally binding international commitments to support adaptation in developing countries. The UNFCCC agreement recognizes that as a matter of equity and responsibility, as well as having greater technological and economic capacity, industrialized nations have a financial and moral obligation. Funds should be predictable and stable, meted out as grants, not loans, be additional to current commitments on foreign aid, and fall under the auspices of the UNFCCC.

V. Climate Change & the Economy

As pressure mounts for action on climate change, skeptics are attempting to reframe the debate as one of the poor versus the environment in a weakening economy, asserting that protecting the environment would disrupt essential economic growth and job creation. While macroeconomic numbers may show growth and progress, a closer look reveals an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor; growing hunger, poverty and conflict; and the earth's resources exploited almost to the brink of collapse. The system has failed both people living in poverty and the environment; perpetuating it will help neither, only more deeply entrench the harm. British economist Sir Nicholas Stern's 2006 report for the UK government estimated that acting today to reduce greenhouse

gas emissions would cost approximately 1% of global GDP per year. Failure to act would in turn eventually cost 20% of global GDP per year or more. The report finds that “[t]he costs of stabilizing the climate are significant but manageable; delay would be dangerous and much more costly.”¹⁰ As President Anote Tong of Kiribati, a small island nation in the Pacific threatened by rising sea levels, recently stated in response to charges that reining in climate change would damage the global economy, “it’s not an issue of economic growth; it’s an issue of human survival,” noting that his own country may be beyond redemption.¹¹

Underpinned by an anthropocentric worldview that holds humankind to be separate and independent of the natural world, the current economic model has reduced the environment to a mere commodity. Perpetual economic growth has been placed above all other societal priorities without regard to the finite nature of the Earth, in effect divorcing economy from ecology, human community from natural surroundings. “We live in a system that has severed or rendered invisible many of our connections to nature – such as the food we eat, or the people and ecosystems from which our consumer products are derived. As a result there is little recognition of the natural environment as the foundation upon which civilization stands.”¹² Yet, the onset of climate change has made clear that economic theory is beginning to collide with planetary limits.

A focus purely on growth is too narrow, and its lack of rootedness harms both the environment and the human community. Rather than reinforcing the transcendence and omniscience of market forces, a fuller understanding, as expressed by theologian Christine Firer Hinze, would bind the economy to both its ecological and social foundations:

“Modern economics focuses on production, consumption, labor, capital, and profit-making in the context of competition for scarce resources. But economics in its fuller, classical sense is the science whose subject is the gathering, cultivating, and distributing of the earth’s material resources, with a view to the survival and thriving of human communities. Thus understood, economy, *oikonomia*, mediates between ecology on one hand and the *oikoumene* (from which the English word ‘ecumenical’ is derived) of human interconnected community on the other.”¹³

The health of the economy and the health of the environment are intimately linked, along with the well-being of people and communities. The weaknesses in the economy cannot be resolved by the disembodied “invisible hand” of market forces without looking to the long-term structural issues that seek to subsume human dignity and ecological sustainability to profit margins and macroeconomic growth.

VI. Climate Change & Energy

Fossil fuels, particularly petroleum and coal, are becoming increasingly problematic as the primary energy sources driving the global economy. Costs are rising and supplies are falling. Carbon emissions from their use are driving climate change, while even the extraction process is environmentally damaging. Conflict, human rights abuses and corruption plague the industry. As the inherent dependence of the current economic system on fossil fuels seems to concentrate all its flaws more heavily in the sector, there has never been a better time to critically examine both the generation and consumption of energy.

Energy efficiency measures are a vital first step, assuring the maximum use from scarce energy resources. Strong national efficiency standards will be necessary for the points at which energy is consumed - buildings, vehicles, appliances and industry. Additionally, the sourcing of energy needs to be diversified, and although no simple substitute for fossil fuels exists, there are several promising alternatives, including solar and wind power. Used in combination and with adequate support for research and deployment, renewables could go a long way to meeting the energy needs of the U.S., without further harming the atmospheric balance.

Unfortunately, however, not all alternatives are created equal, and biofuels, liquid fuels derived from plants, and nuclear energy are particularly problematic surrogates. The developing food crisis has highlighted the dangerous pitfalls of seeking easy substitutes rather than fundamental changes for a broken system, as the market signals to farmers and investors that fuel crops for the privileged few are far more profitable than food crops for the hungry many. The high costs and disposal of waste remain significant hurdles for the nuclear industry, while its reliance on consistent and copious supplies of water for cooling is becoming increasingly problematic with global warming.

On the other hand, a well-designed and integrated energy policy could help reinvigorate communities and create good jobs, in the process of transforming the economy to a more sustainable future. The Apollo Alliance defines “green jobs” as “family-supporting, middle-skill jobs in the primary sectors of a clean energy economy – efficiency, renewables, and alternative transportation and fuels.”¹⁴ Many of the jobs that could be created around retrofitting, efficiency and renewable energy infrastructure would by nature be less amenable to offshoring than traditional manufacturing, and could hold promise for states whose industrial bases have been hollowed out by misguided trade policies. The Alliance holds that by linking clean and sustainable economic development to workforce development and upward mobility, a transformed economy can in fact become a pathway out of poverty and lay the groundwork for economic security and revitalized communities.

VII. The Plan

The U.S. has the highest per capita emissions level of any country. With approximately 5% of the world's population, the U.S. is responsible for nearly a quarter of global carbon dioxide emissions. Individual lifestyle changes will be essential, but they will not be enough. As Americans switch to compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFL's), cut down on driving, and question what else they can do to be better stewards of the environment, perhaps the most important action revolves around the November 4th ballot box. There is an urgent need for leaders and representatives who not only understand the issue, but are willing to lead the country in a new direction. Five platform points to consider:

1). Do no harm (or at least no more harm)

An aggressive mitigation plan should be the cornerstone of any integrated strategy to address climate change. Such efforts should be firstly guided by science and secondly by principles of fairness, based on common but differentiated responsibilities among nations. While it is increasingly clear that catastrophic climate change cannot be averted unless all nations are on board with emission reduction schema, it is also clear that industrialized nations, based on their greater historical emissions levels, financial and technological capacities, and principles of equity, should bear the greater burden. Scientists estimate that industrialized nations must cut their emissions levels by at least 25-40% below 1990 levels by 2020, and 80% by 2050.

2). Responsibility to protect

Adaptation, or assisting vulnerable communities adapt to the coming changes, is the crucial corollary to mitigation efforts, and can range broadly from water management to disaster prevention to public health spending. Adaptation strategies cannot be substituted for mitigation efforts; even the best adaptation plans will not withstand catastrophic climate change. However, they are necessary, because not only are the impacts of global warming inevitable, but they are already a present threat. Adaptation should be participatory, adequately funded, and managed under the auspices of the UNFCCC process, according to the binding commitments made there.

3). Power up

A coherent, forward-looking energy policy that invests in good jobs and local communities will be essential in shifting the economy onto a more sustainable track. Strong federal policies creating vigorous renewable energy standards, promoting high energy and fuel efficiency, and supporting expanded research and deployment for alternative energy and efficiency technologies will be essential in shifting the economy away from fossil fuel dependence. Internationally, policies should be in place to support the transfer and implementation of new, clean technologies in developing countries.

4). Avoid false idols

As the disillusionment surrounding the biofuel debate grows, it is all the more important to remember that there are no quick technological fixes for global warming, nor any miracle fuels that will smoothly and easily replace fossil fuels. Band-aid solutions and quick fixes, such as a "gas-tax holiday" or opening new areas to oil exploration, should be approached with skepticism. The prospect of real transformation can seem intimidating, but doesn't necessarily correlate to a decrease in quality of life - only a change in where value is placed, reoriented onto true human fulfillment, rather than material possessions.

5). Restore right relationships

Over the next year and a half, ending in December 2009 with the UNFCCC Conference of Parties meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, countries will be attempting to achieve a fair, just and effective post-2012 agreement on climate to build on the commitments made in the Kyoto Protocol. As the largest per capita and historical emitter of greenhouse gases, the U.S. must be a constructive participant at the table, willing to take on serious commitments as a member of the international community. Unilateral approaches encourage a focus on short-term self-interest rather than real progress, and there is such a short window for action before the tipping point towards disaster. Climate change is a global problem, and the U.S. must be part of a global solution.

VIII. Conclusion

To their credit, the candidates for Presidency have recognized the need for urgent action on climate change, although they differ on various important details, including specific carbon targets, support for alternative energy and how a mechanism to reduce emissions would be structured. Regardless, the deeper question is whether either of their proposals would create enough of a paradigm shift to appropriately and adequately assign value to shared natural resources and a common ecological future. Both candidates should be encouraged to move beyond a domestic focus to understanding climate within a global framework, with profound poverty and justice implications.

Climate change challenges the nation to stretch its collective political imagination in directions that it is not accustomed to traveling - raising its sights to long-term sustainability and a focus on authentic human development and security within the global community. Only by recognizing the intimate connection between the health of the natural world and the well-being of human communities can the common future of the earth community be secured.

Endnotes

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