

Catholic Coalition on Climate Change

Putting Catholic faith into action on climate change

Pope's Encyclical Promotes Environmental Justice & Solidarity
July 8, 2009 Update

Pope Benedict's "Caritas in Veritate" (Charity in Truth) Outlines and Elaborates on Environmental Justice

On Tuesday, the Vatican released the Holy Father's third encyclical letter, Charity in Truth, emphasizing that "charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples." Focused primarily on international economic issues, Pope Benedict calls for a "true world political authority" to promote the common good of all and for "greater social responsibility" by businesses.

The encyclical re-emphasizes that the truth of the sacredness of human life and human dignity are to guide all we do as Catholics: "Openness to life is at the center of true development."

In this context, Benedict XVI devotes the fourth chapter of the encyclical to "The development of people, rights and duties, the environment." Here, the pope says that, "The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole."

"In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation."

Benedict warns against seeing nature as more important than people. But neither should the opposite be held as true: "which aims at total technical dominion over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a 'grammar' which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation."

The problem of unequal distribution of non-renewable energy is a global responsibility and, "Here we are dealing with major issues; if they are to be faced adequately, then everyone must responsibly recognize the impact they will have on future generations, particularly on the many young people in the poorer nations, who ask to assume their active part in the construction of a better world."

An authentically Catholic response to the climate change as articulated by the Vatican and the U.S. Catholic bishops and carried out through the partners who are members of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change has always been about the care of creation and protection of those most vulnerable to climate impacts. Pope Benedict reinforces these twin goals: "the protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet."

The document goes on to say: "The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction...when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits...the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature."

You are encouraged to read the full [document](#). It is a rich and powerful re-articulation of Catholic social teaching and its application to many important moral issues of today including environmental issues.

Climate Change Legislation

There have been false reports or assumptions that the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change have called for the support of the climate change bill that recently passed the House of Representatives. These reports and assumptions are false.

The Coalition takes its lead from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and other partners. Bishop Howard Hubbard, chairman of the bishops' Committee on International Policy and Ken Hackett, President and CEO of Catholic Relief Services wrote to members of the House recently and did not endorse the bill as a whole but did outline both the positive elements of the bill as well as areas needing improvement. See the text of the letter [here](#).

A primary concern was the lack of money dedicated to assisting the poorest nations around the world adapt to climate change impacts.

Because of its highly technical nature, many aspects of the bill are beyond the competency of the bishops. For example, how many of the CO2 allocations are auctioned or given away. But they have insisted that the fundamental moral test for this legislation is that it does, in fact, begin to reduce greenhouse gas pollution and thus help protect the climate upon which all depend and that the burdens of climate change or public policies designed to address climate change do not unduly fall upon poor people at home and abroad.

As the bill stands now, it appears that both the policies and the resources to protect poor people at home are sufficient. Those provisions must not be weakened as the bill moves to the Senate. The policies that help poor nations adapt to climate change appear to be sound but the resources allocated to this goal are far from where they need to be.

In short, the bishops will support or oppose only those provisions in the bill concerning impacts on poor people here and abroad.

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