



Why Does the Church Care About Global Climate Change?

At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It 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.”¹

INTRODUCTION

There is increasing discussion of global climate change, also called “global warming,” which refers to long-term increases in average global temperatures that result from natural variation and human activities. Although some uncertainty still exists as to the exact nature and effects of global climate change, a broad scientific consensus has developed that some significant warming has occurred, brought about in part by human activities. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops expressed in *Global Climate Change*, its 2001 pastoral statement on climate change, this issue “is about the future of God’s creation and the one human family” (1). To help address contemporary questions such as climate change, Catholics bring a long tradition of applying our Church’s social teachings to complex issues.

Sacred Scripture calls believers to care for God’s creation and all of God’s children. As creation unfolded under God’s loving hand, God saw all that he had made and found it “very good” (Gn

1:31). God created the human person in his “divine image,” placing the human creature at the summit of the created order. “Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone.”² God also blesses the other creatures who share the earth and makes clear the connection that exists between all living things (see Gn 1:27-31). God calls us as his stewards to care for the garden he created. The natural world serves as a source of inspiration for our faith and our love for the Creator. Through biblical stories, psalms and parables, and the beauty of the natural world, we can come to know God more fully.

Catholic social teaching, which is rooted in Scripture and the tradition of the Church, is an instrument of evangelization³ and expresses the social doctrine of the Church, outlining ethical principles to guide the development of a morally just society. These principles are particularly applicable to the many challenging social, political, economic, and ecological questions of our times.

Three themes from Catholic social teaching apply in a particular way to the Church’s concern for the environment. First, concern for the environment calls us to respect human life and dignity. Second, as the world becomes increasingly interdependent, we have a call to promote the common good and the virtue of solidarity. Finally, in caring for the environment, we have a special responsibility to the poor and vulnerable, who are most affected and least heard.⁴

STEWARDSHIP AND THE COMMON GOOD

“The fundamental message of Sacred Scripture proclaims that the human person is a creature of God (cf. Ps 139:14-18), and sees in his being in the image of God the element that characterizes and distinguishes him.”⁵ Because humans are social

beings, they can find their fulfillment and pursue their individual good when they “come together in stable groups with the purpose of attaining a common good.”⁶ In light of the human person’s unique dignity and pre-eminent place within creation, “the relationship of man with the world is a constitutive part of his identity.”⁷ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops pointed out in its statement *Renewing the Earth* that as stewards, “we seek to explore the links between concern for the person and for the earth, between natural ecology and social ecology. The web of life is one.”⁸

In examining environmental questions, the concept of the “common good” is central in promoting the dignity, unity, and equality of all people.⁹ Achieving the common good requires us to recognize that we exist “with and for” others and that we act in such a way that respects and protects the fundamental rights of all humans. The common good also requires a concern not only for the people of today but for future generations as well. It compels us to work towards worldwide cooperation on issues of global concern.¹⁰

SPECIAL CONCERN FOR THE POOR

God also calls his children to care for one another, most particularly the poor and those who cannot fully care for themselves. Our responsibility to the poor and vulnerable requires that we open our hands and hearts to those in need, taking special care to aid and comfort them (see Dt 15:7-11). We see the face of Christ in the poor, the vulnerable, and those living on the margins of society. By caring for them, we draw closer to the Lord, fulfilling and spreading the message of his love. We will be judged by our response to the least of these (see Mt 25:35-40). As part of one body in Christ, each believer has an obligation to use his or her God-given talents for the improvement of the human condition and the attainment of the common good (see 1 Cor 12:7, 12).

POVERTY AND AUTHENTIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Global climate change poses one of the greatest threats to the most vulnerable among us. Because of poverty, age, health, and location, the poor are especially susceptible to the potential negative impacts of global climate change. The poor and vulnerable often do not have the economic and technological resources to either adapt to or ward off the expected impacts of climate change. Heat waves, droughts, and storms and their consequent economic costs fall most heavily upon the poor.¹¹ Since the “least of these” are most at risk from the climate change, Christians have a particular duty to address the moral and human implications of climate change.

“Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting the common good.”¹² Every individual and institution must accept responsibility for caring for God’s creation, and “it is a responsibility that must mature on the basis of the global dimension of the present ecological crisis and the consequent necessity to meet it on a worldwide level, since all beings are interdependent in the universal order established by the Creator.”¹³ Every creature depends upon the same global ecology, a series of separate yet interdependent systems that provide air, food, water, and basic resources. The planetary commons, comprising these shared resources, are easily exploited when we fail to recognize the interconnected nature of God’s creation. Therefore, common effort is required to preserve God’s gifts to us.¹⁴

This attention to the environment also must reflect the special concern for the poorest members of the human community, as poverty and environmental degradation often go hand in hand.¹⁵ God created the bounty of the earth to be shared among all of his children, equitably and justly, and he commands us to be stewards of this



great creation. To embrace our role as stewards of God’s creation, we must employ “restraint and moderation in the use of material goods, so we [do] not allow our desire to possess more material things to overtake our concern for the basic needs of people and the environment.”¹⁶ In fulfilling these duties, we promote a focus on authentic development, encouraging the economic and spiritual advancement of the poorest people on earth as a means to living out our Catholic faith.

THE VIRTUE OF PRUDENCE

The virtue of prudence is required in both the dialogue and in our response to the challenges posed by global climate change. As the bishops said in *Global Climate Change*, “Prudence not only helps us identify the principles at stake in a given issue, but also moves us to adopt courses of action to protect the common good. [It is not] simply a cautious and safe approach to decisions. Rather, it is a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned



basis for taking or avoiding action to achieve a moral good.”¹⁷ In the case of global climate change, we know enough to understand that scientific arguments for action on the reduction of greenhouse gases cannot be easily dismissed. It seems prudent, then, not only to continue to research and monitor this phenomenon but to take steps now to mitigate possible negative effects in the future. The efforts of our Church focus on the needs of the poor, the weak, and the vulnerable, as inaction and inadequate or misguided responses to climate change may pose greater burdens on the poor, particularly the poor in developing nations.

NOTES

- 1 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2001), 1. Some subsequent references given in text.
- 2 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2005), no. 108, citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 357.
- 3 Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus (On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum)* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1991), no. 54.
- 4 USCCB, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1991), 5.
- 5 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 108.
- 6 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 150.
- 7 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 452.
- 8 *Renewing the Earth*, 2.
- 9 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 167.
- 10 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 166.
- 11 *Global Climate Change*, 6.
- 12 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 466.
- 13 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 466.
- 14 *Global Climate Change*, 8.
- 15 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 482, 483.
- 16 *Global Climate Change*, 8.
- 17 *Global Climate Change*, 6.