



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

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Care for creation

This second article in the Climate Justice series looks at climate change from the perspective of Catholic Social Teachings.

TO PROVIDE a credible response to the ecological crisis confronting the world, Christian action needs to be based on a clear understanding of our faith and beliefs.

The starting point for all Christian activity is the biblical notion of the world as creation. Christian responsibility for the environment begins with the appreciation of the goodness of all God's creation. "God looked at everything He had made, and He found it very good" (Genesis 1:31).

God created men and women in His image, and calls on us to take care of the earth and cultivate it (Genesis 1:27-28; 2:15). Men and women are therefore challenged in a special way to take responsibility for creation. Nevertheless, we are not the Creator; we are a part of this creation, not its master.

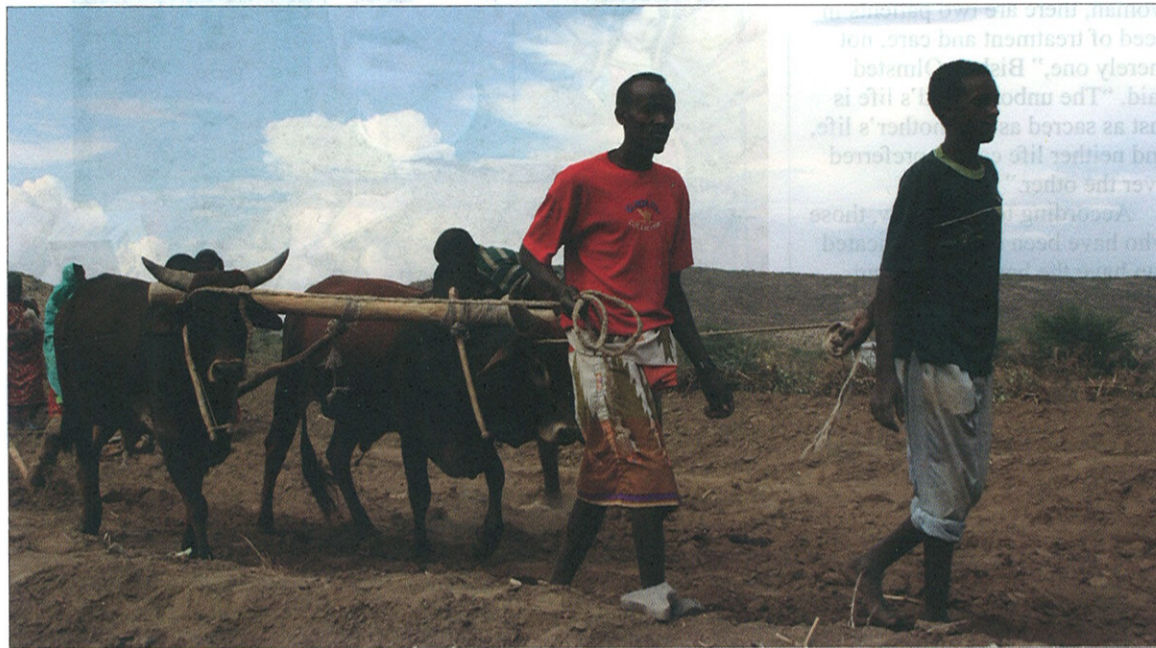
Pope Benedict XVI emphasised this position. "To the extent that the Earth was considered God's creation, the duty of 'subjecting' was never understood as an order to make it a slave, but rather as a duty of being a custodian of creation and developing its gifts; of collaborating ourselves in an active way in God's work, in the evolution that God placed in the world, so that the gifts of creation are prized and not trampled upon or destroyed" (Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting in Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone, August 6, 2008).

Our Catholic Social Teachings

Our role as stewards of the earth is encapsulated in our Catholic Social Teachings as the Principle of the Dignity of Creation.

However, the Principle of the Dignity of Creation is not the only principle of our social teachings applicable to the crisis of climate change. Other relevant principles include those on the Dignity of the Human Person, Solidarity, the Common Good, Promotion of Peace, Participation, Universal Destination of Goods and Subsidiarity.

The Principle of the Dignity of the Human Person emphasises that all we do must be directed towards the good of the human person. Climate change and its results threaten the



Drought in Kenya is one of the results of global warming, that is causing extreme and unpredictable weather. In some areas, it means heavier rainfall and floods. In other areas, longer droughts, heat waves and forest fires.

basic right to life of all human persons today and for future generations.

"Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Statement, November 14, 1991).

The Principle of the Common Good requires each of us to work towards the good of the broader community and not just our own individual needs. Climate change largely results from the actions of individuals, companies and countries narrowly focused on their own economic needs.

The climate crisis can only be mitigated if we all recognise the interdependence of the world and make sacrifices for the sake of others. We need to have "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, a willingness 'to lose oneself"



for the sake of the other instead of exploiting them" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38).

This harks to the Principle of Solidarity, where we recognise that each person is connected to the other and we should stand together as one single human family.

Solidarity places special obligations upon industrial democracies. "The ecological crisis," Pope John Paul II wrote, "reveals the urgent moral need for a new solidarity, especially in relations between the developing nations and those that are highly industrialised" (World Day Peace Message, no 10, January 1, 1990).

The Principle of the Promotion of Peace asks us to ensure right relationships all round – with God, self, others and creation. In his World Peace Day message on January 1, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI pointed

out the growing phenomenon of "environmental refugees" and how it is important to protect the natural environment in order to build a world of peace.

The Principle of Participation emphasises that each of us has a duty, not just a right, to take action in what determines our well-being and future. Climate change is about our collective well-being and our future. For too long, scientists and social advocates have campaigned to make the world aware of the problem of climate change. Awareness of the problem is only the first stage. Concrete action is needed next.

Option for the Poor

The Church has always advocated a special preferential option for the poor. This emanates from the Principle of the Universal Destination of Goods (God intended all of earth's goods to be enjoyed by everyone, not just a few; we should see to it that the most vulnerable have what they need) and the Principle of Subsidiarity (Higher level bodies should enable and

empower lower-level bodies to develop and flourish).

Climate change is also very much about the poor and the rich.

It is the poor – people and countries – who often do not have the resources to face many problems, including the potential impacts of climate change. Many of the poor in poor countries live in desperate situations that lead them to adopt environmentally harmful agricultural and industrial practices. In many cases, the heavy debt burdens, lack of trade opportunities and economic inequities in the global market add to the environmental strains of the poorer countries.

Historically, the richer industrial economies have been responsible for the highest emissions of greenhouse gases. Also, significant wealth, technological sophistication and entrepreneurial creativity give these nations a greater capacity to find useful responses to this problem. They need to exercise a leadership role in preserving the environment and share these emerging technologies with the less-developed countries.

It is a structural injustice that those who have contributed least to the problem of climate change, because they live in less developed and less industrialised regions, are the first to feel the effects.

Unrestrained economic development is not the answer to improving the lives of the poor. Catholic Social Teachings have never accepted material growth as a model of development. A "mere accumulation of goods and services, even for the benefit of the majority," as Pope John Paul II said, "is not enough for the realisation of human happiness" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 28).

Climate change is, of course, not just a problem for the poor – it affects all people and the basis on which they are able to conduct their lives, as well as future generations. As Pope Benedict XIV puts it: "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" (*Caritas in Veritate*, 48).

Climate Change Realities

Is climate change real?

It is widely accepted that the scientific community has provided evidence that climate change is real. The 2007 Assessment Report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that "the warming of the climate system is unequivocal" and that human activity is causing it.

What causes global warming?

Greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and CFC (chlorofluorocarbons), are naturally produced by the earth's ecosystem. They are

critical to maintaining the average temperature of the earth by absorbing and emitting radiation in the atmosphere.

Industrialisation has resulted in the excessive emission of greenhouse gases. Carbon dioxide levels, for example, have increased by 30 per cent over the last 50 years. The two main causes of this are the burning of fossil fuels (coal, oil, natural gas) to generate electricity, power transport and provide heat, and change in land use (deforestation which remove trees and thus adversely impact the absorption of carbon dioxide through photosynthesis).

Excessive greenhouse gases in turn leads to "radiative forcing" whereby the heat leaving the earth's surface is

trapped, causing the earth's atmosphere to warm up. Consequently, global average temperature has increased by about 0.8°C (more than 1.4°F) in the last century.

How does global warming lead to climate change?

The increases in air and ocean temperatures destabilise climate systems, creating extreme and unpredictable weather. In some areas, this means heavier rainfall, which causes floods. In other areas, there are longer droughts, heat waves and forest fires.

When water gets warmer, it expands. Together with the melting of ice caps, snows and glaciers, this causes sea levels to rise at the rate of several millimetres per year.

What are the negatives of climate change?

If left unchecked, the potential costs will be very high.

Rising temperature will diminish yields of staple food crops, causing hunger and malnutrition. Mosquitoes breed better in warmer climate, enabling malaria to spread further. Heatwaves will kill people. Fresh water supply will decrease as snow and glaciers melt. Island states like Maldives will be submerged or uninhabitable. Flooding could contaminate water supplies.

A 2005 World Health Organisation study indicated that 150,000 people every year will die from the effects of global warming, that number could double by 2020. And 10,000

species are likely to be extinct in the next 50 years.

Are there any positives?

Some temperate countries are experiencing shorter winters and warmer average temperatures. Tourism and agriculture could benefit in the short term in these countries.

The melting of ice in the Arctic could open up the Northwest Passage (between Canada and the North Pole), dramatically reducing the passage of ship between Asia and Europe. It will also improve access to the large reserves of oil and gas lying under the Arctic seabed (international squabbling over who owns the reserves has already started).