

CLIMATE CHANGE – THE GREATEST THREAT TO CREATION

What can Franciscans do?

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change, or rather its cumulative impacts, if allowed to continue unchecked, threatens to devastate our corner of creation – this wonderful planet Earth entrusted by God to humanity's stewardship.

Sustainable development worldwide cannot be achieved unless humanity succeeds in slowing down the rate of human-induced climate change, already under way, developing effective measures to both mitigate and adapt to it.

Scientists assure us that the climate has often changed in the past. But for the first time, it is changing as a result of human action, or rather human criminal negligence. And it is changing far more rapidly than what geological research reveals about previous shifts. This time round, much of our flora and fauna do not have time to adjust in a way to guarantee their survival, and in a few decades, hundreds of millions of people may become 'climate refugees' – fleeing from areas which can no longer sustain habitation.

I am sure you have all heard about greenhouse gases, causing the greenhouse effect, which results in global warming. The biggest emitters of GHGs being our energy production and transport systems, overwhelmingly based on fossil fuels (oil, coal, gas) whose use results in high emissions of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Other industrial and some agricultural processes also release CO₂ and other GHGs such as nitrous oxide, methane, and fluorocarbons.

You have also seen the increasing media focus on melting glaciers and polar ice caps, rising sea levels, floods, hurricanes, droughts, heatwaves – all attributed to climate change.

There is broad agreement amongst the scientific community that if the global mean temperature increases more than 2 degrees centigrade over the pre-industrial level, the knock-on impacts will become catastrophic and barely manageable. The current level is already 1 degree above the baseline, and business-as usual means an increase of anything up to 6/8 degrees by 2100: But local increases could be higher.

Stabilisation of global temperature around the 2 degree mark involves huge cuts, fast, in GHG emissions – which scientists affirm are technically possible. But this means a massive revolution in energy generation, industrial, agricultural and transport processes, as well as in consumer lifestyles.... not to mention a sea change in the profit, expansion driven mindset of the business class, in particular of 'big oil' and the car industry. .

So political feasibility is another matter.

Indeed, this revolution implies a total transformation in the way humanity views its relationship to and responsibility for the created world.

RELIGIONS

This issue has already engaged the world's religions, but there remains much to be done for their 'message' to feed through and be understood by the public at large and acted on by political leaders. Joint action and advocacy on climate change by the major Christian faiths, in concert with other non-Christian faith communities has not yet happened. It needs to happen NOW, since 2005 will be a critical year for the climate change policy framework, as I will explain later on.

First, a quick tour what is happening amongst the major religions and faith communities.

The Anglican Communion

The Anglican Communion as such has no climate change programme, but the Archbishop of Canterbury engaged the issue, in his first homily on the environment this July.

I want to suggest some of the Christian reasons we might have for regarding ecology as essentially a matter of justice for the human as well as the non-human world.a different myth relates to the actual choices we must make if we are to have a human future compatible with the will and character of God.

The Church's contribution has to consist not primarily or exclusively in public lobbying, though that is important, but in its showing forth of a different myth – the truth of creation's relation with the creator and especially the role of human work and thought within that. This is what is exhibited every time the Eucharist is celebrated. But this puts a considerable challenge before congregations as well: how easy is it to see in our worshipping practice and our habitual life together both a celebration of God's communication in what God has made and a process of conversion from the homo economicus towards the new humanity which restores blessing and justice to their proper place?

The Holy See

The Vatican has no climate change programme as such either, and so far no Papal encyclical has focused specifically on the topic. However, as a sovereign state, it is a UN member regularly represented at international conferences on climate change. The Holy See's representative to the most recent conference of the Contracting Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, in Milan last December stated:

One of the primary principles which must govern responses to climate change is the consideration that there is an order in the universe which must be respected. This principle not only sets limits to human activity but it directs it towards a careful and respectful use of the environment.... True mitigation and adaptation can be realized only when human beings are placed at the center of concerns for sustainable development. The human person occupies a distinctive place within creation. Clear choices are then required based on justice, cooperation and solidarity among nations, all exposed to the common concern.

We, therefore, bear the responsibility for the choices that we make today and must assure that the common patrimony of humanity is improved and not destroyed.

US Catholic Bishops

In July, US Catholic Bishops directed a letter to US Senators, appending their 2001 Climate Change statement. The letter urged:

While there may not be full scientific consensus or complete certainty as to the consequences of climate change, there seems to be sufficient scientific consensus that prudence would dictate taking preventive or mitigating action...The United States bears a special responsibility to lead and help shape responses that serve not only its own interests but those of the entire human family. The adoption of even modest efforts could help send a signal that the time has come to move forward. Technological advancements and entrepreneurship are hallmarks of our society. Applying them innovatively could help usher in a more environmentally benign affect on global climate.

The World Council of Churches

Comprising a fellowship of 342 churches, (but excluding the Roman Catholic Church, which however, is represented on a number of working groups) WCC is out in front, with a WCC Climate Change running for several years. It is an active observer at the UN conferences.

European Christian Environment Network

This ecumenical network of individuals and organisations has also developed Climate Change Coalition, and published a 'dossier' available from their website.

Alliance for Religions and Conservation

Based in the UK, this network brings together Christians and non-Christians, focusing both on climate change, and non-climate change conservation issues.

RC Religious Orders

Under the leadership of the OFM-JPIC office, a group of JPIC promoters from Roman Catholic religious orders based in Rome issued a booklet. "Integrity of Creation An issue for Religious Today: Climate and Global Change". (I have had the ecumenical privilege of being a corresponding member of this group for the last three years.) An extract from their booklet, published in 17 languages:

St. Bonaventure following the experience of St. Francis elaborated a theology of the Sacramentality of Creation, that is, the footprints of Christ in the created world. The world is inhabited by the Sacred. All created things are a sign and a revelation of the Creator who leaves an imprint everywhere. To purposely destroy any aspect of creation is to deface the image of Christ present in all of creation. Christ suffers not only when people are denied their rights and exploited but when seas, rivers and forests are desecrated. When creation is perceived as sacramental, manifesting and leading us to God, our relationship with others is also challenged to move from one of dominance and power to one of reverence and respect.

Churches and inter-religious groups on climate change are already very involved. In the prevailing ecumenical atmosphere, we should reach out to other Christians, as well as non-Christians working on this issue.

AN INPUT FROM FRANCISCANS?

This call from the Rome-based religious is surely a starting point for TSSF, the SSF as a whole and other Franciscans communities.

A very high-visibility opportunity for advocacy on climate change by religious (and non-religious) will certainly emerge next year here in the UK, one year before the York chapter.

Tony Blair has promised to put climate change at the top of agenda of the G8 summit he is hosting in Scotland next July – and a major policy speech is expected in the near future, according to the Downing Street media office.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in his environment lecture:

Our country is in a remarkably influential place at present, with the chair of the G8 consortium and the Presidency of the European Union in its hands next year. Next year will also see the United Nations Millennium Stock-Take conference, the twentieth anniversary of Live Aid, and – we hope – the beginning of negotiation about what happens when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. The Prime Minister has already declared that his international priorities for 2005 will include climate change and the future of Africa. ..It seems the moment to look for a new level of public seriousness about environmental issues.

The fact that the York chapter is AFTER these year 2005 events should not, I believe, be an excuse for keeping quiet next year. After all, what happens in 2005 will shape the environment in which the chapter will be taking place. Franciscan involvement, rather than just silent observation of civil society advocacy in 2005, in particular around the G8, will surely provide a rich source of ideas and direction for proposals to the chapter formulated in early 2006.

The UK NGO activities, with the BOND network, Christian Aid, CAFOD, and the leading environmental NGOs out in front, will also be the reference points for similar activities by civil societies in other G8 countries, and indeed, non-G8 ones as well.

So, I would urge that TSSF and SSF should involve themselves, in whatever way they can and wish, at both local and national levels, in the broadly based G8 advocacy activities of UK civil society on both climate change and sustainable development issues in general.

I would also urge, an ecumenical and inter-religious approach – in accordance with our traditions, starting with our founder, Brother Francis SSF, who not only reached out to each and everyone, from lepers to Pope...but fearlessly risked his life to go and talk to the Muslim sultan

And much as he valued study, reflection, learning and meditation, he was first and foremost, a man of action.

I hope our study week here in Almouth can make this balance, so that we not only reflect, but decide to act on the central creation issue of human-induced climate change. Let us sketch a roadmap together.

Indeed our resources, whether in terms of people, time and money are limited – but again the example of St. Francis is there to inspire us. What resources did Francesco Bernadone have when he became a servant of Christ?

BACKGROUND NOTES:

THE INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATING PROCESS The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was adopted in 1992, and came into force in 1994. The related Kyoto Protocol was adopted in 1997, but it still not in force, although ratified by 124 countries representing over 70% of humanity. Its entry into force requires that at least 55 nations accounting for 55% of global GHG emissions must ratify. Present ratifications represent 43% of emissions, so the protocol cannot enter into force unless either Russia, or the USA ratify. EU and numerous other countries have stated that whether or not the Protocol enters into force they will fulfil its provisions. Negotiations on implementation rules of the KP continue at annual meetings of the Contracting Parties to the UNFCCC. The next COP is in Buenos Aires in December..

The Protocol provides for a 5% reduction in GHG emissions below their 1990 levels by 2008-2012. Negotiations for a new commitment period (2012-2020) are scheduled to start in 2005. (Temperature stabilisation at around 2 degrees C would involve emission reductions to 60% their 2000 levels.)

President Bush withdrew the US from the Kyoto Protocol process, while Russia has given conflicting indications about whether it will ratify. The present US administration questions the scientific basis of the UN approach to climate change, and the principles underlying the Kyoto Protocol, as well as the concept of emission reductions.

UK POLICY The UK government has announced that it will implement policies going way beyond present Kyoto Protocol commitments, leading to a 50% cut in UK GHG emissions by 2050. However, other policies fomenting a huge increase in air and road travel could make these goals impossible to reach.

RESOURCES.

1. International/Intergovernmental.

Secretariat of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change
<http://www.unfccc.int>

Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change <http://www.ipcc.ch/>

European Environment Agency: Impacts of Europe's changing climate (EEA Report),
http://reports.eea.eu.int/climate_report_2_2004

European Union. European Climate Change Programme
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/climat/eccp.htm>

2. International/NGOs

Climate Action Network International <http://www.climatenetwork.org/>

Climate Action Network Europe <http://www.climnet.org>

3. Religious

Archbishop of Canterbury: Environment Lecture. 5 July 2004. "Changing The Myths We Live By"
http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/040705.html

Intervention By The Holy See At The Ninth Conference Of The Parties (COP-9)
To The United Nations Framework Convention On Climate Change
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2003/documents/rc_seg-st_20031210_climate-change_en.html

US Catholic Bishops circular letter to Senators. <http://www.ncrlc.com/Bishops-climate-letter.html>

Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/index.htm

World Council of Churches Climate Change Programme <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/jpc/ecology.html>

European Christian Environmental Network Climate Change Coalition:
<http://www.ecen.org/topclim.shtml>

Order of Friars Minor: Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. <http://www.ofm-jpic.org>

"Integrity of Creation An issue for Religious Today: Climate and Global Change" <http://www.ofm-jpic.org/globalwarming/index.html>

Alliance for Religions and Conservation. <http://www.arcworld.org>

4) UK

HM Government: Department for International Development.

Key Sheets on Climate Change and Poverty

<http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/climatechange/keysheetsindex.asp>

Report on Future Flooding:

<http://www.foresight.gov.uk/servlet/Controller/ver=2674/userid=2/>

Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research. www.metoffice.com/research/hadleycentre/

6) some useful information sources

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/climate/> <http://www.planetark.com/index.cfm> www.pewclimate.org/ -

7) UK NGOs affiliated to Climate Action Network Europe.

Council for the Protection of Rural England – CPRE <http://www.cpre.org.uk>

Sustainable Development Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs

www.riia.org karasj@riia.org

Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development - FIELD

jurgen.lefevere@field.org.uk farhana.yamin@field.org.uk jake.werksman@field.org.uk

Friends of the Earth England, Wales and Northern Ireland - EWNI

www.foe.org kateh@foe.co.uk

Green Alliance www.green-alliance.org.uk ga@green-alliance.org.uk

Greenpeace UK www.greenpeace.org.uk info@uk.greenpeace.org

The Wildlife Trust

www.wildlifetrust.org.uk jeveritt@wildlife-trusts.cix.co.uk

Institute for European Environmental Policy – IEEP

www.cerf.org/iiec iieclondon@iiec.cerf.org

National Trust for England, Wales & North Ireland – NT

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/environment

robjarman@smt.ntrust.org.uk

Transport 2000 www.transport2000.org.uk stephenj@transport2000.org.uk

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds - RSPB

www.naturenet.net/orgs/rspb.html john.lanchbery@rspb.org.uk

The Verification Research, Training and Information Centre – VERTIC

www.VERTIC.ORG

World Wide Fund for Nature UK – WWF UK www.wwf-uk.org; ccardoso@wwf.org.uk

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