

# Climate Change and Ecological Responsibility

## A Roman Catholic Perspective

### Marie Dennis, SFO

At its core, the ecological crisis is a moral challenge. It calls us to examine how we use and share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God's creation.

The pressing ethical questions at the heart of this great challenge have been increasingly well articulated in the Roman Catholic tradition. The U.S. Catholic Bishops' Conference, for example, wrote in 1991 a major document entitled "Renewing the Earth," and in 2001, another on "Global Climate Change." Pope Benedict XVI furthered this reflection as recently as in his address on the World Day of Peace (January 1st) and in his address to the diplomatic corps on January 10th.



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As breathtaking scientific discoveries unveiled the 13.7 billion year old and yet-unfolding universe story, a deep religious and ethical reflection by Catholic theologians and practitioners like Teilhard de Chardin, SJ, Thomas Berry, CP and Miriam Therese McGillis, OP has led many in our tradition to embrace a new sense of our own location as part of a larger earth community and cosmic reality with which our own future is inextricably linked – to develop a worldview that is ecological without being ecocentric. As we learn to care for creation, slowly we are realizing that God, through creation, cares for us.

The ethical implications of this insight are extremely important in an era of economic, social and ecological crisis, highlighting the need to design a way forward that ends the false dichotomy between human well-being and

ecological integrity.

Key principles of Catholic social thought – now Catholic social and ecological thought - describe well our developing perspective.

As a Catholic community we hold:

- *a God-centered and sacramental view of the universe*; We affirm the goodness of the natural world. Our sacramental life depends on earthy elements: water, oil, bread, and wine – and the mystical dimensions of our tradition find God dwelling in created things, laboring and loving through them

We hold:

- a consistent *respect for human life*, which extends to respect for all creation; and
- a worldview affirming the ethical significance of *global interdependence and the universal common good*. Responses to global climate change should reflect our common responsibility for the future of our planet. Individual nations must measure their own self-interest against the greater common good and contribute equitably to global solutions.

We hold:

- *an ethics of global and intergenerational solidarity*, promoting cooperation and just structures of sharing in the global community;

We have:

- an understanding of *the universal purpose of created things*. Thus, for example, the right to private property is matched by the responsibility to use what we own to serve the common good. Our tradition speaks of a "social mortgage" on private property.

We hold:

- *an option for people who are poor*, and believe that action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice that does not put the poor at greater risk or place disproportionate and unfair burdens on poor nations.

We are concerned for:

- *authentic development*, which respects human dignity and the limits of material growth. Pope John Paul II warned that in a desire "to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow," humanity "consumes the resources of the earth, subjecting it without restraint . . . as if it did not have its own requisites and God-given purposes." Our tradition calls for sustainable economic policies that reduce current stress on natural systems while including hundreds of millions of poor families who live at the edge of survival.

- Rooted in the dignity of each person and increasingly aware of the *connections between violent conflict and environmental destruction*, Catholic teaching also makes clear that to cultivate peace, we must protect creation.

Our tradition emphasizes:

- the principle of subsidiarity. We believe it is important for everyone to protect the integrity of creation "close to home," making lifestyle changes, especially in wealthy countries, to live with less focus on material gain and consumption; at the same time, we believe stronger and richer nations must have a sense of moral *responsibility*, so that a *real international system* can be established to address these great challenges based on the *equality* of all peoples and on respect for their legitimate differences.

"Grateful for the gift of creation," said the US Catholic Bishops, . . . "we invite Catholics and men and women of good will in every walk of life to consider with us the moral issues raised by the environmental crisis. . . . These are matters of powerful urgency and major consequence. They constitute an exceptional call to conversion. As individuals, as institutions, as a people, we need a change of heart to preserve and protect the planet for our children and for generations yet unborn."