

Most Reverend William Skylstad

Facing the Wind-What are the signs?

**A reflection about our human stewardship of God's Creation
and the Climate of Our World.**

Gonzaga University

April 6, 2010

My task this evening is to offer some reflections on our religious duty to care for God's creation, and to focus these thoughts on stewardship and the moral dimensions of climate change. Let me begin this with a story close to home.

As I began my priestly vocation almost 50 years ago, I was stationed in Sacred Heart Parish in Pullman, Washington. When the wind was right one could smell the pungent odor from a paper mill 30 miles away in Lewiston, Idaho. In recent years, even though the mill is still there, the odor is no longer present- a testimony to the increasing sensitivity and action to mitigate this kind of pollution, and a hopeful sign as we discuss climate change this evening.

Another example is when the bishops of the northwestern United States and southwest Canada addressed the regional concerns about the Columbia River in 2001. In our pastoral letter, we tried to address both the ecological and economic questions that, in many ways, remain unanswered today but are important to surface nonetheless. We concluded that:

People live in the world of nature, not apart from it. They need to alter that world at times in order to provide for their needs. The means are now available to use regional resources more efficiently while doing much less harm to regional ecologies. We can live in greater harmony with our surroundings if we strive to become more aware of our connection to, and responsibility for, the creation that surrounds us.

These local and regional examples of the interplay between economic, social, cultural and ecological life can be applied to perhaps the most threatening and daunting environmental challenge of our day, global climate change.

In a recent article in the Smithsonian magazine entitled, "Barrow, Alaska: Ground Zero for Climate Change: Scientists converge on the northernmost city in the United States to study global warming's dramatic consequences" the author, Bob Reiss, shares what he heard from the native Alaskans living in America's northernmost city that there is simply less food than there once was. Mr. Reiss goes on:

For two weeks I'd been visiting northern Alaska coastal villages as a guest of the Coast Guard, and what I'd heard was disturbing. Each year the sea ice was getting thinner and arriving later. Coastal storms have become so dangerous that some villages—lacking the shore ice that used to protect them—will have to be moved miles inland. In one village I watched the Army Corps of Engineers build rock walls to shield against fierce waves. Fish species from warmer waters were showing up in fishing nets. Insects that no one recalled seeing before—such as spruce bark beetles, which kill trees—were falling from the sky. There was a proliferation of flies that make caribou sick.

An open Arctic Ocean will certainly increase the opportunities for international commerce. But at what price for the people who make a living off the land? Is a warming planet that's opening the Arctic best for the people who live in the far north and depend on the wild food that grows, grazes and swims there?

Catholic Social Teaching: Key themes for Climate Change: Prudence, Poverty and Common Good

In the U.S. bishops' statement on climate change, we said: "*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.*"

As Catholics, our contribution to the ongoing debate about climate change and what to do about it is to neither exaggerate scientific claims—particularly about future impacts—nor deny that human activity is the primary force driving climate change. Our task is to recapture our ancient teachings about stewardship and the care of creation *and* to be a voice for those who have contributed the least to climate change but are now and will in the future suffer its worst consequences.

In our statement, we called urged consideration of three key principles to better understand the uniqueness of a Catholic approach to climate change: prudent action in the face of some uncertainty; a priority concern for poor people most impacted by climate change, both at home and abroad; and the promotion of the common good.

The Virtue of Prudence

We live in an age when those who wish to seek common ground are often drowned out by partisan and ideological voices and marked by an unwillingness to lower the volume, truly listen and seek compromise. Even when the bishops were studying and drafting their statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, the issue was one of the ones suffering from the ideological noise that often drowns out voices of reason, dialogue and compromise.

In fact, recent polling data suggests that even fewer Americans believe that climate change is real and caused by human activities than shortly after we wrote our statement. Contributing to this problem is clever messaging on the part of those who have the most to lose by reducing greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change. But scientists themselves are partly to blame. In some instances, they have told us bad news for so long that people have tuned out and moved on. In other cases, intentional or careless articulations of the science have offered openings to those who wish us to believe that climate change is not a problem.

Addressing these ideological splits, Msgr. Pietro Parolin, Vatican Undersecretary of State said,

In recent times, it has been unsettling to note how some commentators have said that we should actually exploit our world to the full, with little or no heed to the consequences, using a world view supposedly based on faith. We strongly believe that this is a fundamentally reckless approach. At the other extreme, there are those who hold up the earth as the only good, and would characterize humanity as an irredeemable threat to the earth, whose population and activity need to be controlled by various drastic means. We strongly believe that such assertions would place

human beings and their needs at the service of an inhuman ecology. I have highlighted these two extreme positions to make my point, but similar, though less extreme attitudes, would also clearly impede any sound global attempts to promote mitigation, adaptation, resilience and the safeguarding of our common future.

It is in the midst of these positions and conversations that the bishops and the Vatican are calling for the application of the virtue of prudence to the issue of climate change. Prudence dictates that we do not need to know everything with absolute certainty before we should act. In his 2008 World Day of Peace Message, Pope Benedict said that:

Prudence does not mean failing to accept responsibilities and postponing decisions; it means being committed to making joint decisions after pondering responsibly the road to be taken, decisions aimed at strengthening that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.

We purchase insurance for our cars not because we believe we will never get in an accident. If we believed that we would never buy the insurance. In the same way, we must make investments now in reducing our carbon footprint and assisting those most impacted by climate change because, as the bishops said in their statement:

“In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed. Significant levels of scientific consensus...justifies, indeed can obligate, our taking action intended to avert potential dangers. In other words, if enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind's well-being, prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative action.”

Priority for the Poor

While not surprising but nonetheless disappointing, I find that few policymakers, advocates and institutions are as concerned about climate impacts on the poor as people of faith. The Catholic community and other people of faith have made the protection of the poor a top priority when considering climate solutions. This protection is from both the most harmful impacts of climate change and the potentially harmful impacts of remedies for climate change.

Climate impacts on the poor are generally not high on the list of most environmental organizations. And business interests are far more concerned about the impact on the bottom line and value for their shareholders than protections for the poor. But the fate of our one human family is *our* concern. We believe that the hunters in Barrow, Alaska and the farmers in drought-stricken Ethiopia are our brothers and sisters. But the hunters, the farmers and the hundreds of millions of poor people making less than a dollar a day do not have high-priced lobbyist in Washington looking after their interests. This is your job and my job. Their plight is our plight because they are “the least of these” whom we are most obligated to protect.

Jesus reminds us that whenever we take care of those without food or shelter and when we visit those who are imprisoned or sick, we have seen his face in them. But this passage in Matthew’s gospel begins with Jesus gathering not just individuals but nations and separating them as a shepherd would separate the sheep from the goats according to their

deeds. As a nation, we must ask ourselves if we are to be counted as among the righteous or the condemned?

Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, insists, “care for ‘the least of these’ is a defining religious duty.” The Presidents of nine Catholic bishops’ conferences affirmed this message in a June 2008 letter to G-8 leaders, and declared that care for the poor and vulnerable is also a “moral and public responsibility.”

Common Good: Global climate is part of the planetary commons

Scientists say that a tiny fraction of the molecules of air that we breathe today were breathed by people of the past. This could certainly include the air that Jesus himself breathed. The Latin word for breath is “spiritus” so it would be fair to say that the spirit of the Lord is indeed upon each of us.

So consider that the atmosphere, the air we breathe, the molecules that make up this air (including oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide) are indeed a planetary common. The breath we take today will circulate around this room and eventually around the globe. Other gases we put into that atmosphere from our human activities, including methane, unnatural amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas pollutants, will not stay near their source, either. We are changing the climate not just over Spokane or the state of Washington but all over the globe.

The Catholic principle of the common good means that our individual and our collective actions have consequences for others. The increased awareness of the dangers of driving drunk has helped cut back on drunk driving incidents. So now that we know our actions are forcing climate change, should we not do what we can to curtail this behavior?

A good example of the intersection between the common good and climate change is the issue of water resources. According to the Climate Institute, current water shortages could become critical in the near future.

The Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture revealed that one in three people are already facing water shortages (2007). “Around 1.2 billion people, or almost one-fifth of the world's population, live in areas of physical scarcity, while another 1.6 billion people, or almost one quarter of the world's population, face economic water shortage (where countries lack the necessary infrastructure to take water from rivers and aquifers); nearly all of which are in the developing countries.”

We know, for example, that ice sheets and glaciers are melting at an increased rate due to climate change. Those dependent on water from glaciers—the 1 billion people dependent on the Himalayan range, for example—could be facing severe water shortages in the future.

Our colleagues working in our name in Africa for Catholic Relief Services are telling us that years of relief and development work are being threatened by increasingly erratic weather patterns with life-threatening implications for the millions of people dependent on subsistence agriculture. In some places like Ethiopia, extended droughts are forcing people to move to the already overcrowded cities and creating enormous stress on fragile infrastructures and overworked relief agencies. In other places, the rainy season is wetter and storms are larger. And while climate scientists do not attribute any given storm to

global climate change, they believe that such extreme weather events are more likely in the future.

In the end, the principle of the common good means that our response to climate change must reflect a profound understanding of the interdependence of all people and the rest of creation. It also means the Church supports the right to private property, as long as it is used for the common good, that there is a “social mortgage” on that right. When human life, dignity and rights are threatened or diminished because of our economic actions, our consumption and waste, and our public choices, we must reexamine our responsibilities. We must consider our contributions to the forces that put people and the planet at greater risk...even in small ways. We are called to act to advance not simply our own interest and appetites, but the good of the entire human family and creation itself. This is the ultimate example of the common good: together we must protect the planet, ease the plight of those without access to natural resources and be willing to share more fully the limits of the resources intended for all.

Stewardship: Wise use of resources

Closely related to the notion of the common good is that of stewardship. Stewardship of God’s creation must be balanced with the right to economic initiative and the defense of human rights. It is unfortunate that the Judeo-Christian tradition has been seen by some as an impediment to responsible stewardship because the word “dominion” in the Book of Genesis has been misinterpreted to mean that humankind was given permission to exploit creation rather than be co-creators with God’s unfolding plan for Creation.

We know that the Bible is filled with references to a fuller understanding of the relationship between God, Creation and our responsibilities toward creation. As believers and religious leaders, our love and appreciation for God’s gift of creation begins with the belief that “the earth is the Lord’s and all it holds.” (Ps 24:1) “Our Creator has given us the gift of creation: the air we breathe, the water that sustains life, the climate and environment we share--all of which God created and found ‘very good.’ (Gen: 1:31)” As Pope Benedict said in his World Day of Peace Message this year:

The true meaning of God’s original command . . . was not a simple conferral of authority, but rather a summons to responsibility . . . Nature is a gift of the Creator, who . . . enabled man to draw from it the principles needed to ‘till it and keep it’ (cf. Gen. 2:15). Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man.” (#6)

The Catholic approach to climate change and the environment must recapture these ancient teachings, rekindle the spirit of connectedness to Creation and renew our obligations to all creatures and especially each other.

Seen in this light, the current levels of consumption by those of us in the developed world are simply unsustainable and immoral. Again, Pope Benedict makes this point:

I would advocate the adoption of a model of development based on the centrality of the human person, on the promotion and sharing of the common good, on responsibility, on a realization of our need for a changed life-style, and on prudence, the virtue which tells us what needs to be done today in view of what might happen tomorrow.” (WDP #9)

This changed lifestyle must begin to be more serious and more sober. I would go so far as to say that each economic transaction must be viewed in light of our present ecological crisis, and examined in light of our needs vs. our wants.

Again, Pope Benedict gives us some insight. During a retreat to a group of Italian priests he said: “Obedience to the voice of the earth is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, the desires of the moment... Existence itself, our earth, speaks to us, and we have to learn to listen.”

Simplifying our lives can have the added benefit of making room to examine and improve our relationships with each other. Surrounding ourselves with the “stuff” of life often replaces the needs of life: the need for companionship, human relationships. In short, we need to prioritize people over possessions.

Simplifying our lives, becoming aware of our consumption patterns, and decreasing our carbon footprint is all the more essential if we take a moment to contemplate a future that unduly suffers because of our inaction. I have heard from dozens of people engaged in the climate issue precisely because of their concern for their children and grandchildren; as Pope Benedict has said, “Future generations cannot be saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources.” (2010 WDP #8).

Concern about future generations can help link the moral questions about climate change with other life issues; as Pope Benedict asked his Diplomatic Corps, “[H]ow can we separate, or even set at odds, the protection of the environment and the protection of human life...?” In many ways, the current ecological crisis, like so many other issues of human life and human dignity, is one that shows we are out of sync with each other. I believe that climate change is a symptom of a larger problem that has to do with our relationship not only with nature but with God and with each other.

Public Policy Debate

In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict proclaims that, “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.” (51)

It is in this light that I want to turn now to the role of the U.S. Catholic Church (and others in the faith community) in the public arena. As I said earlier, our role is not to exaggerate or minimize climate change and its impacts; the Catholic community be seen as neither the environmental movement at prayer nor the Catholic coal caucus.

Rather our role should be to ensure that public policies on climate change link two moral imperatives: protect God’s Creation and care for the poor. For nearly two decades, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops has been deeply engaged in the debate on environmental policy from this perspective. Through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, we were among the few organizations to assist low-income communities organize against plans to site landfills in their neighborhoods. We advocated for more federal and state funds to clean up the environmental hazards left at abandoned manufacturing plants in these same communities so these facilities could be rebuilt as business incubators.

The Catholic bishops were among the first to press for long-term studies on how energy production and manufacturing harm the baby in the womb and the toddler in the home.

In addressing climate change, the U.S. Catholic Community has been no less involved. In a letter to members of Congress last year, Bishop Hubbard, chairman of the U.S. bishops Committee on International Policy, and Ken Hackett, president of Catholic Relief Services said that:

“A fundamental moral measure of climate change legislation is how it affects the poor in our own country and around the world. As articulated in the bishops’ statement [on *Climate Change*], ‘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 developing nations.’”

Put another way, in testimony before the Senate’s Environment and Public Works Committee in June of 2007, we said, “The real inconvenient truth is that those who have contributed the least to climate change will suffer its worst impacts.”

Therefore, we believe that any proceeds generated by putting a price on greenhouse gas emissions should go first to the people most in need of our assistance, the poor at home and abroad.

For the poor in our own country, the bishops insist that public funds should be used to help offset the likely rise in energy-related costs, including heating and cooling, transportation and energy-intensive goods and services. Around the world, we are concerned that the poorest nations on earth will be most heavily impacted by the consequences of climate change and in need of our assistance. As Bishop Hubbard and Mr. Hackett said, “Congress cannot leave the most vulnerable people without adequate help needed to protect their lives and dignity. For us, this is not a marginal matter, but rather a matter of moral priority and policy.”

I urge you to become engaged in this issue and to help influence your own legislators that public policies must be crafted in such a way as to not add to the burdens already faced by poor people at home and abroad.

Practical Solutions/Models of Engagement

Finally, let me offer some good news. Allow me to share with you the many ways the Catholic community is engaged in this issue.

With all due respect to the secular celebration of Earth Day our own Earth Day goes back centuries, not just forty years. Care for Creation starts with Genesis, not Vice President Gore, and continues with Pope Benedict.

As environmental impacts become clearer and more evident, our Catholic Church has become increasingly engaged. In response to Pope John Paul II’s 1990 World Day of Peace Message, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* in 1991. Shortly afterward, the bishops approved the Environmental Justice Program still housed within the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the USCCB.

As the issue of climate change became a greater concern, the bishops began a process of study and reflection on the moral implications of this ecological crisis. In 2001, the bishops approved, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*.

Then in 2006, in an effort to more fully implement the statement, the USCCB, together with our allies at the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, formed the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, which enjoys the support of a dozen national Catholic organizations, including the Justice, Peace and Human Development and Migration and Refugee Services at the USCCB.

A year ago, the Coalition launched *the Catholic Climate Covenant: The St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor*. The Covenant and the Pledge invites all Catholic individuals, parishes, schools and organizations to examine not only our carbon footprint, but also “Who’s Under Our Carbon Footprint.”

By taking the St. Francis Pledge, Catholics commit themselves or their parish, school or organization to do five things:

- To PRAY about what it means to care for Creation and, about the impacts climate change has on all of Creation, especially the poor;
- To LEARN about Catholic teaching on the environment and the causes of climate change;
- To ASSESS our own carbon footprint and contributions to climate change;
- To ACT to reduce our impact on the environment and our contributions to this problem;
- To ADVOCATE for those without a voice, and to ensure that poor people at home and abroad do not suffer additional burdens because of climate change and its remedies.

Since its launch, nearly three thousand pledges have been registered at www.catholicclimatecovenant.org. I urge you to go to the website, see how parishes, schools and individuals are responding to the St. Francis Pledge, take the Pledge yourself, and then encourage others to do the same.

Other Programs/Models

While the Covenant is one way Catholics are responding to environmental concerns and climate change, it is by no means the only way.

I began with a few local, regional and national stories about the harm created by our lack of attention to the natural world. Let me add a few more good news stories about how the Catholic community is responding to the ecological crisis.

At the national level, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services have launched a major new initiative to educate and activate the Catholic community on global poverty. Catholics Confront Global Poverty includes a significant focus on the impacts of climate change on poor people around the world.

The National Catholic Rural Life Conference has also worked extensively at the forefront of environmental issues, particularly as they impact rural life in the United States. NCRLC devotes a significant portion of their time to the impacts of a shifting climate on agriculture, and the resulting stress that produces on some of our prime agricultural regions.

At a more regional level, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change partnered with the bishops of Florida, Ohio and Alaska to hold three separate hearings on the impacts of

climate change in each of these states. Stakeholders from business, the environmental community and diocesan leaders in education, social concerns and others attended the hearings, and the bishops gained a much greater understanding of the complexities of climate change, its consequences and possible solutions.

In addition, all of the Catholic Charities in Louisiana hosted a day-long, hands-on educational experience last summer for the purpose of understanding how climate change impacts the work of these agencies. In particular, Catholic Charities focused on the issues of emergency response in times of severe weather (such as hurricanes), and implications for housing and community development in low-lying areas of the state.

Finally, the University of Notre Dame hosted a weekend-long symposium last October for Catholic universities to explore ways to integrate environmental awareness, Catholic social teaching on the environment, and practical ways to reduce their carbon footprint into their institutions.

Conclusion

Time will not permit me to continue with this list, but I know through my colleagues at the USCCB, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change and from countless stories around the country that Catholics are deeply engaged in the issue of environmental awareness and taking steps to not only reduce their own carbon footprint, but to examine who's under their carbon footprint as well.

My challenge to you today is to do likewise: to continue taking steps to reduce your carbon footprint, to change your light bulbs, to recycle, to buy less and to conserve more. But as important as these efforts are, my challenge to you is to remember those who don't have light bulbs to replace, things to recycle or enough to purchase the basic necessities for a dignified life.

We do this not because we are environmentalists but because we are Catholic. We have a unique contribution to make to the ongoing debate about climate change and its remedies, though some will misunderstand our actions and our advocacy.

For example, a couple of years ago, Pope Benedict—by then already being dubbed the “Green Pope” by some in the media—celebrated liturgy with young people gathered in Italy. He said that “before it is too late” we must begin to listen to the voice of the earth. In reporting on the homily, one of the news services said something to the effect of, “to emphasize the point, the pope even wore green vestments.” Well it was the first Sunday in September and ordinary time. Every priest wore green vestments.

Indeed, Pope Benedict has challenged each of us to become more aware of not only our carbon footprint, but who is under that footprint. He did this in his inaugural mass when he pointed out that many of “the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.” He challenged us again in this past January's World Day of Peace Message where he emphasized that, “Our present crises – be they economic, food-related, environmental or social – are ultimately also moral crises, and all of them are interrelated. They require us to rethink the path which we are travelling together” (# 5).

So let us rethink the path we are travelling together, and seek to live more in harmony with Creation, with God, and with each other. Taking such a path will surely lead us out of this

crisis, and to what Pope John Paul II called “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation.”

Thank you for your time and attention.