

# Climate change and environmental justice – Catholic perspectives

## A Progressio briefing note

### In brief

There is an overwhelming scientific consensus that climate change is driven by high levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. This scientific consensus is consistent with recent Church teaching and the advice of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. The Church has commented on climate change within its wider teaching on care for creation, stewardship and environmental justice: clear and strong messages on this theme represent a vital contribution to contemporary thinking.

On these wider environmental concerns, there is consensus within the Church, outlined below. Much work has been undertaken throughout the Church to raise awareness of environmental concerns and take action at national and international level. Agencies within the Church such as Progressio and CAFOD here in England and Wales, do a great deal to raise awareness of the issues and to support poor communities adapt to climate change.

### The Catholic Bishops in England and Wales

In 2002, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales added its voice to “the many calling for urgent action to protect our earthly home from further destruction” when it published *The Call of Creation*<sup>1</sup>.

That document called attention to

- the **damage to the earth's life-sustaining mechanisms** (“Emissions of 'greenhouse gases' continue to affect the atmosphere in ways that threaten the balance of life on the planet. The resulting climate change could severely disrupt the lives of all of humankind.”);
- **depletion of the world's natural resources**;
- the impact on the **world's poor**;
- and the loss of **beauty and diversity**.

Care for creation was placed in a theological context:

- that creation has value in itself because it **reveals God**.
- That creation **reveals human sin**, but that it also
- **participates in our redemption**,
- and that Human Beings are **dependent but responsible**.

The bishops called for

- **education** towards ecological responsibility
- and **renewed partnerships** to deal with the issues: with other Churches and faiths, with civil structures.
- They also noted the important for **personal responsibility** and conversion to a different way of understanding ourselves and the ways in which we **lead our lives**, especially the
- importance of **acting in solidarity**.

Since 2002 the Catholic Community have continued to take this calling seriously. Much work has been done, and continues to be done at individual and parish level as well as Bishops and organisations such as Progressio, CAFOD and working in conjunction with Christian Ecology Link, by which the Catholic community lives out the calling to care for creation.

### His Holiness Benedict XVI

The Pope has articulated many of the same principles and issues in the official body of text we know as **Catholic social teaching**. Care for Creation is a central tenet of Catholic social thinking.

The Pope's most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*<sup>2</sup> restates this. Benedict XVI discusses the duty to protect the environment. He argues that “**Nature is at our disposal not as “a heap of scattered refuse”**,”

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/content/download/4096/28059/file/CallofCreation\\_CBCEW\\_CAFOD.pdf](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/content/download/4096/28059/file/CallofCreation_CBCEW_CAFOD.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html)

but as a gift of the Creator who has given it **an inbuilt order**, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15).<sup>3</sup>

Importantly, Pope Benedict argues that we must not see nature as “something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism — **human salvation cannot come from nature alone**, understood in a purely naturalistic sense. This having been said, it is also necessary to reject the opposite position, which aims at total technical dominion over nature, because **the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure**; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. “

The justice aspect of the environmental debate is well articulated. The Pope regrets the way “some states, power groups and companies **hoard non-renewable energy resources**” which he says “represents a grave **obstacle to development** in poor countries”.

Importantly, Benedict notes the importance for **developed countries to take the lead** in reducing their own environmental impact, which may involve in the adoption of new, more environmentally friendly life styles for their populations.

In his message for the **World Day of Peace (January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010)** “**If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation**”, Pope Benedict argues forcefully for ecologically responsible behaviour in the face of “realities” such as climate change.<sup>3</sup>

“Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?”

Very recently in Germany, at his **address to the Bundestag<sup>4</sup>**, the Pope again stated that **ecology was important**:

I would say that the emergence of the ecological movement in German politics since the 1970s, while it has not exactly flung open the windows, nevertheless was and continues to be **a cry for fresh air** which must not be ignored or pushed aside, just because too much of it is seen to be irrational. Young people had come to realize that **something is wrong in our relationship with nature**, that matter is not just raw material for us to shape at will, but that the earth has a dignity of its own and that we must follow its directives. In saying this, I am clearly not promoting any particular political party – nothing could be further from my mind. If something is wrong in our relationship with reality, then we must all **reflect seriously on the whole situation** and we are all prompted to question the very foundations of our culture. Allow me to dwell a little longer on this point. The **importance of ecology is no longer disputed**. We must **listen to the language of nature** and we must answer accordingly.

## The Holy See

Statements by the Secretariat of State to meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change show that the Holy See is of the understanding that human activity linked to CO2 emissions is responsible for climate change, and that concerted global action is urgently required to address adaptation and mitigation issues. They also echo the themes put forward by Pope Benedict such as responsibility towards the poor and future generations, and the need to consider climate change as part of concern for responsible stewardship of the earth’s resources.

See for example the **Holy See’s intervention at the Copenhagen Conference of Parties<sup>5</sup>**, which calls for “the responsible involvement of all segments of human society to search for and discover an adequate response to the tangible reality of climate change”, and notes efforts taken by the Holy See itself to reduce CO2 emissions: “The Holy See, in the albeit small state of Vatican City, also is making significant efforts to take a lead in environmental protection by promoting and implementing energy diversification projects

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace_en.html)

<sup>4</sup> [www.catholicerald.co.uk/news/2011/09/22/full-text-popes-address-to-the-bundestag/](http://www.catholicerald.co.uk/news/2011/09/22/full-text-popes-address-to-the-bundestag/)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/secretariat\\_state/2009/documents/rc\\_seg-st\\_20091217\\_migliore-copenhagen\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2009/documents/rc_seg-st_20091217_migliore-copenhagen_en.html)

targeted at the development of renewable energy, with the objective of reducing emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and its consumption of fossil fuels.”

## **The Pontifical Academy of Sciences**

A working group commissioned by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences published a document about mountain glaciers, its front page<sup>6</sup> said: “We call on all people and nations to recognise the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and by changes in forests, wetlands, grasslands, and other land uses.”

This is perhaps the clearest statement yet from voices high in the Church that global warming is due to man-made factors. There are very many in the Church, especially in the global South, who would concur.

## **Concluding comments**

For Progressio, the relationship between the environment and poverty is very clear. People who are poor and marginalised are the ones who suffer most the effects of environmental degradation. People who Progressio work with can talk about how their lives and livelihoods have been directly affected by environmental changes. Therefore, as Pope Benedict has said, the environment is a question of global justice, solidarity and of cherishing life.

Church agencies are involved in the process leading up to RIO+20, the intergovernmental meeting to be held in June 2012, twenty years after the original Rio conference that agreed global climate and CO<sub>2</sub> targets. This next conference is looking at ways in which a “green economy” might be developed that will enable tackling poverty, feeding people and building economic growth is not done at the expense of the planet and future generations.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_academies/acdscien/2011/PAS\\_Glacier\\_110511\\_final.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_academies/acdscien/2011/PAS_Glacier_110511_final.pdf)