

January 2010

## The Environment is God's Gift to All People

Pope Benedict XVI's message for the World Day of Peace observed each year on January 1<sup>st</sup> was entitled: *"If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation."* His message adds a needed perspective in the debate over climate change and in light of the uncertain conclusions of the recent Copenhagen Climate Conference. "The environment", the Pope insists, "must be seen as God's gift to all people and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations."

For the Holy Father, natural ecology is inseparably linked to human ecology. He urges us to see the interrelatedness of the various social, economic, political or environmental crises that confront the human family today. Fundamentally, they all are moral crises which require "new rules and forms of engagement"; in other words, a rethinking of the path that we are traveling down together.

While the precise details of how climate change will affect the world are not known, the projections shared by scientists have been alarming. We can no longer ignore the visible signs that changes are occurring in our environment that will affect all life, especially human life. In many poorer nations, years of relief and development work are being undone by prolonged droughts, more intense storms and other extreme weather conditions associated with climate change.

Pope Benedict asks: "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?"

In 2001, the U.S. Catholic Bishops issued a statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*. We expressed our concern that disproportionate and unfair burdens not be placed on poor, developing nations. We called for collective action for the common good.

More recently, the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change launched the Climate Change Covenant, encouraging Catholics and other people of good will to take the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor (<http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/>). This effort is supported by nearly 30 national Catholic organizations including the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It calls on each of us to examine our carbon footprint and reflect on how our consumption impacts the poor.

Unfortunately, those nations meeting in Copenhagen were unable to muster the political will to translate pollution cut pledges into concrete action. There was no legally binding pact and no commitment to pursue one in 2010.

Even without an international treaty, U.S. public policies designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions will likely increase energy costs. Various bills under consideration in Congress fall far short of the adequate funding necessary to protect the poor and vulnerable who – whether at home or abroad – contribute the least to climate change but will be affected most by policies to counter it.

Domestically, provisions must be made to offset these costs for low-income consumers; internationally, to promote the common good of all, wealthier nations like the US need to help poorer nations to develop sustainable economies in ways that will not exacerbate climate impact.

The environment is God's gift to all people, including those of future generations, and the use we make of it is a shared responsibility as stewards of creation (cf. Genesis 1: 28) The lack of responsible stewardship over the environment through the neglect or misuse of the earth and its resources is another instance of man's inhumanity to man – and as such threatens peace. Pope Benedict insists, *"Before it is too late, it is necessary to make courageous decisions."* *"If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation."*

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