

Opinion: Church Taking Climate Change Seriously

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In the last decade, we have seen more devastating storms, debilitating droughts, runaway melting mountain snow caps, and unprecedented snowfalls. It builds in us a worried feeling that the Earth's climate, something we thought was as stable as the seasons our grandparents reminisced about, just won't be the same for our kids. Such phenomena locally and across the world are especially disrupting the well-being of the poor and vulnerable who have less ability to adapt to these changes. For instance, some Catholic relief organizations are managing the needs of "climate refugees," people fleeing sinking islands and expanding deserts. Call us traditionalists, but we don't like thinking about that kind of change.

The world's religions can offer some time-honored perspectives on this new challenge and the controversies surrounding it. Pope Francis will be releasing a major document on environmental justice next year, and it's sure to propel the conversation forward for all people of good will. As employees working together at the Cincinnati Archdiocese anticipating this, we would like to share two "cardinal virtues" from our faith tradition already guiding our local efforts: prudence and temperance.

The Catholic Church and other faiths teach that, when it comes to an issue that could have such radical impacts on life as climate change, we must take the warnings seriously and act out of prudence, even if there are differences of opinion. Prudence directs us to act, even in a situation with less than full certainty, if significant research (e.g. the National Academy of Sciences¹), suggests that the costs of not acting could threaten people's lives and dignities. Hence, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged that we prudently respond to climate change and other environmental threats with temperance, another chief virtue that balances our use of the world's resources.²

Allow us to propose some ideas how we can put these values to work:

Assess our energy use and act: First and foremost, we can all try to use less. Many Catholic churches and those of other faiths now have care for creation ministries, helping us achieve this. On top of that, households and institutions can readily lower utility bills and lessen their carbon footprints through energy efficiency. In the Archdiocese, for example, we are working to align our energy usage with our teachings. At our Dayton headquarters, we have just completed HVAC and lighting upgrades that reduced electric consumption by 50% and gas usage by 30%. At our Cincinnati headquarters, we are beginning major renovations that include LED lighting throughout, night temperature setbacks, highly efficient HVAC equipment, occupancy and daylight sensors, and generous insulation. Many of these efficiencies have also been installed at our new archives building downtown. Moreover, many parishes are dramatically upgrading their facilities and realizing significant energy and cost savings.

Advocate: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has released for comment until the end of the month its "Clean Power Plan," an initiative to reduce carbon pollution at power plants, improve health, and mitigate climate change. Also, for now, Ohio boasts its own energy

efficiency and renewable energy standards, which the state legislature will be evaluating soon. While not endorsing any plan's details, the Catholic bishops applaud such policies overall. They state that we need action now for the common good of present and future generations. Yet, these policies should receive local public input and protect workers and their families from any negative effects resulting from new standards.^{3,4} All citizens are encouraged to comment.

Educate: Local Catholic universities and groups are sponsoring an open-to-the-public panel, "Climate Change, Global Security, and the Common Good," on November 13, at 7pm at Mount St. Joseph University. It will feature background on Catholic teaching on this issue as well as Dr. David Titley, a retired Rear Admiral from the Navy, who will share why our security demands action.

Pray: Pope Francis exclaimed, "If we don't take care of the environment, there's no getting around it."⁵ So, whether or not we each believe that humans are primarily responsible for climate change, let us all pray that we find common ground around greater temperance in the use of our natural resources. Just in case. For the sake of our children, it's the prudent thing to do.

¹ <http://nas-sites.org/americasclimatechoices/>

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with representatives from other religions on the occasion of 23rd World Youth Day*, 2008.

³ Letter from Archbishop Thomas Wenski and Bishop Richard Bates to EPA Administrator, Gina McCarthy, July 30, 2014.

⁴ Catholic Conference of Ohio, *Reflections regarding SB 310: Ohio's Alternative Energy Portfolio Standards*, May 2014.

⁵ Pope Francis, *Meeting with President of Ecuador*, April 22, 2014.