CLIMATE CHANGE: A CALL TO JUSTICE

(Rome South-South Dialogue Declaration)

In Rome on 1 – 2 October, 2010 we, bishops, priests, laypeople from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, shared our reflections and views on climate change with one another and with well known international scientists. We thank the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the German Catholic Bishops’ Organization for Development Cooperation (MISEREOR) for making our dialogue possible.

Our dialogue experience impels us to make this call to justice in the light of the tragic reality of climate change.

The Reality of Climate Change

Climate change is a fact already affecting in diverse ways and extent all peoples of the earth, and especially the poor. The scientific community confirms the reality of global warming as seen in sea level rise, rainfall pattern changes, glacier melting in mountains, ice melting in the Arctic and Antarctica, as well as increasing mean temperatures and more occurrences of extreme weather events (storms, heat and cold waves, extended floods, severe droughts, etc.). Green House Gases, mainly carbon emissions from fossil energy (oil, gas, and coal), has already warmed the globe by 0.75ºC within the last century.¹

Among many tragic effects of climate change are the following:

- serious threat to the cultural and national identities of peoples, who in some cases are becoming environmental refugees;
- In Oceania, fear of the loss of whole islands due to rising sea levels and flooding; intrusion of salt water from the sea into drinking water sources;
- In Asia, glacier melting in the Himalayas endangering the lives of people due to flooding and resulting in water shortage in the long-term; coastal areas, especially heavily populated mega delta regions in south, east, and southeast Asia placed at

greatest risk due to increased flooding from the sea together with more frequent and heavier typhoons; flooding from the rivers in some mega deltas.

- In Africa severe recurring droughts causing deaths, destroying livelihood, causing desertification; 75-250 million people projected to be exposed to increased water stress; potential reduction of yields from rain-fed agriculture up to 50% by 2020.
- In Latin America, significant melting of important Andean glaciers; disappearance of some glaciers in the tropical latitudes; warming air temperatures and change in precipitation patterns affecting food production; and the possibility of dry-out of the Amazon rainforest.
- Biodiversity placed at great risk; warming sea temperatures causing the loss of fish habitats and the extinction of some fish species, coral bleaching and collapsing of reefs.

Projected Challenges

1. Projections of future climate change on rain fed agricultural production show that agricultural production will decrease dramatically affecting food availability.
2. Generalized droughts could increase by millions the number of people without secure access to potable water.
3. Climate sensitive diseases such as malaria, dengue, and meningitis could be more widespread in tropical countries.
4. A host of very serious ecological, social, economic, political and cultural problems would inevitably follow if projections of climate change are unfortunately realized.
5. The specter of weak governance in many developing countries will further exacerbate the situation.

Root Causes and Impact on the Poor

The roots of climate change are directly related to the industrialization and economic expansion mainly of northern countries. They followed the conventional model of development based on carbon dioxide emitting oil-gas-coal energy consumption. The present acceleration of climate change demonstrates that such model is not sustainable and works against the common good of all peoples. Since the root causes lie in the policies and practices of northern countries, we believe that they have an ecological debt to the rest of the world.
Man-made deforestation in Amazonia, in tropical Africa, in subtropical southern forest in Latin America, and in some Asian countries further contributes to climate change. Moreover, this contributes to local warming and changes in rainfall patterns, thus increasing the vulnerability of forest-dependent people.

It is those who contribute the least to climate change, namely the poor, who most suffer the consequences of climate change. They are more vulnerable and have inadequate resources for coping, especially after catastrophes. Yet so far the voice of the poor is not heard and thus they are not able to participate in decision making at both, local and global levels.

**Necessary Decisions**

Scenarios of continuing climate change forcefully impress the urgent need to radically reduce greenhouse gas emissions as quickly as possible in order to ensure that global temperature rise is kept below 2.0°C. This is a call to all industrialized nations to start reducing greenhouse gases emissions immediately. It is likewise a call to developing countries for a low carbon development, which should be enhanced by adequate policies and technology sharing by developed countries. Despite the international protocols and conventions ratified by most of the nations, there has not yet been a change in production and consumption patterns as well as in lifestyles.

Sincere dialogue among the peoples of the earth on climate change and justice is a prerequisite.

**Our Convictions as Church**

“If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation”\(^2\)

Addressing the issue of climate change we are guided by the following convictions:

- *The Universal Destination of the Goods of Creation – Intergenerational Justice*: The earth is God’s gift to all inhabitants of the planet, the home of all, including future generations. “… on this earth there is room for everyone: here the entire human family must find the resources to live with dignity, through the help of nature itself — God’s gift to his children — and through hard work and creativity”\(^3\). Development has

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\(^2\) Message of the Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the celebration of the world day of peace. 1\(^{st}\) January 2010.

\(^3\) Caritas in Veritate (CV), Benedicto XVI, 50.
to be achieved in a sustainable manner. We strongly reiterate the call of the Holy Father for solidarity and intergenerational justice⁴.

- **Profound personal conversion in values and in lifestyle:** We cannot afford to follow the current logic of “having” instead of “well-living.” Consumerism is a tragedy of our times. With great urgency we have to change our lifestyles towards simplicity and austerity, responsibility and accountability.

- **Socio-economic transformation:** We need a conversion towards a new economic development paradigm that is eco-friendly, governed by the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift, instead of the logic of merely maximizing profits.⁵ Such transformation will help erase the unjust relationships between the poor and the rich sectors within our nations.

- **Ethics in Economics, the Human Person at the Center:** Fundamental to a new economic development paradigm is an ethical approach. At the center of genuine development is the human person, in the context of God’s gift of creation. The Holy Father has expressed this powerfully, declaring that “the economy needs ethics in order to function correctly — not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centered”⁶.

- **Evangelizing and Consciousness-Raising:** We need to evangelize our people with regard to climate change, raising the consciousness of our faithful regarding the reality of climate change, its moral dimensions, and its impact on the present and the future.

**Our Commitment and Our Call to Justice**

1. In the light of the above convictions, we are committed to the education of individuals in evangelical values towards the care of the earth and justice for future generations. For this purpose we shall promote the Church’s social doctrine, especially such principles as the universal destination of the goods of creation, responsible stewardship, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity and option for the poor.

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⁴ Cf. CV, 48.
⁵ Cf. CV 34-42.
⁶ Cf. CV 45.
Celebrations of faith, popular piety, catechesis and pastoral activities are privileged places to communicate fundamental values. All our ecclesial tasks should be oriented towards ecological conversion as a dimension of an engaged integral faith.

2. We call on the governments of the world to have a fundamental orientation to the global common good and give prior consideration to the “well-living” of peoples and to save God’s creation from the inordinate and dominant search for profit and, more importantly, from greed. We call upon them to incorporate in their economies present and future environmental social costs and not allow the poor and future generations to bear these costs unjustly.

3. We call upon technically advanced countries to liberate economic growth from high carbon emissions. They should demonstrate that economic sustainability with low carbon emissions is technically feasible and politically achievable through changes in lifestyles and in production and consumption patterns. Duly recognizing their ecological debt, they have to share clean technologies with developing countries so as to empower them to reach sufficiently sustainable economic prosperity with low carbon emissions.

4. We call on churches, governments and policy makers to assist our people, especially the poor about what they can do to adapt to the new situations. Financial and technical supports are needed for adaptation as well as help for environmental refugees. This is a call of justice and not merely of charity.

5. We call for good, fair and transparent governance. It is a key to integral and sustainable human development. Development agents and civil society should lobby at all levels for just and common-good oriented governance, including just distribution of the common wealth. Decision makers should consider local wisdom and the right of the people to participate actively in negotiating policies.

6. We call on developing countries to promote and conduct a South-South dialogue so that their united voice would be heard by developed countries and they could more effectively participate in caring for the integrity of creation. At the same time through policy and practice they also have to be committed to the reduction of carbon emissions.

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7. We all have to promote an alternative life style, a new culture of respect for nature, of simplicity and sobriety, of hope and joy. Such a lifestyle requires organic and eco-friendly production, responsible consumption and recycling, thus contributing towards intergenerational justice.

Conclusion

From the very beginning of time Creation has always been a most dramatic sign of transcendent power and providence – of God’s love and presence. We need to recognize the abundant yet finite resources of God’s gratuitous gift. This will help us to live a life of austerity and simplicity. Thus, future generations will receive from the present not a polluted and ruined earth but a habitable and welcoming earth. And they too would delight in contemplating God’s love and providence manifested in His creatures.

With affection we invoke the continued protection and guidance of our Lord Jesus Christ. His Spirit, we pray, will renew our mind and the face of the earth.

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Dom Dimas Lara Barbosa, Secretary General of the National Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Brazil
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8 Cf. CV 51.
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