Written Testimony
Religious and Moral Dimensions of Global Climate Change
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Introduction

I am John Carr, Secretary of the Department of Social Development and World Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). At a time of growing attention to the challenges of global climate change, the United States Catholic Bishops welcome these hearings and your leadership on an issue that clearly affects God's creation and the entire human family.

The religious leaders here today share an abiding love for God's gift of creation and the biblical mandate and moral responsibility to care for creation. As people of faith, we are convinced 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) We believe our response to global climate change is a sign of our respect for God's creation and moral measure of our nation's leadership and stewardship.

A decade ago, the U.S. Catholic bishops insisted that

"{A}t its core, global climate change is not simply about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. Rather, global climate change is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both the 'human environment' and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those generations who will succeed us…. As people of faith, we believe that the atmosphere that supports life on earth is a God-given gift, one we must respect and protect. It unites us as one human family. If we harm the atmosphere, we dishonor our Creator and the gift of creation." (*Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good,* U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2001)

With new initiatives in Congress, by the Administration, and at the G8 Summit meeting, this is an essential time to build up the common ground for common action to pursue the common good for all of God's children and creation. On climate change, it is now time to act with clear purpose, creativity, care and compassion, especially for our

sisters and brothers who will suffer the most from past neglect and, if we turn our back, our future indifference.

Climate Change and the U.S. Catholic Bishops

The Catholic Bishops are not scientists, climate experts, or policy makers. They are moral teachers, pastors, and leaders. For a decade, the USCCB has sought to listen, learn, and discern the moral dimensions of climate change. The bishops accept the growing consensus on climate change represented by the International Panel on Climate Change, but also recognize continuing debate and some uncertainties about the speed and severity of climate change. However, it is not wise or useful to either minimize or exaggerate the uncertainties and challenges we face.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops seek to offer a constructive, distinctive, and authentic contribution based on our religious and moral teaching and our pastoral service, especially among the poor in our country and around the world. For us this is not a new concern, but a call to apply traditional values to new challenges. It is:

- Distinctive in voicing the principled concerns of a community of faith, not an interest group. We are not the Sierra Club at prayer or the Catholic caucus of the coal lobby.

- Authentic in drawing directly on traditional principles of the Catholic Church -- the life and dignity of the human person, the option for the poor, subsidiarity and solidarity, as well as the duty to care for God's creation.

In this testimony, I draw directly on an unprecedented statement of the entire body of United States bishops, *Global Climate Change: Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good.* This statement is nuanced, not alarmist. It is traditional, not trendy. It is an expression of faith, not politics. For us, this began with Genesis not Earth Day. I also submit to the Committee a recent appeal for action which reflects the demands of prudence, the pursuit of the common good, and a priority for the poor from the Chair of the Bishop's Committee on International Policy, Bishop Thomas Wenski, to leaders of Congress, the Administration, business, environmental organizations, and other groups.

A Moral Framework

The USCCB's approach to climate change reflects these three central and traditional ideas: the virtue of prudence, the pursuit of the common good, and the duty to stand with and for the poor and vulnerable.

Prudence. This old fashioned virtue suggests that while we may not know everything about global climate change we know that something significant is occurring. We do not have to know everything to know that human activity is contributing to significant changes in the climate with serious consequences for both the planet and for

people, especially those who are poor and vulnerable. Prudence requires wise action to address problems that will most likely only grow in magnitude and consequences. Prudence is not simply about avoiding impulsive action, picking the predictable course, or avoiding risks, but it can also require taking bold action weighing available policy alternatives and moral goods and taking considered and decisive steps before the problems grow worse. Prudence tells us that "we know that when a problem is serious and worsening it is better to act now rather than wait until more drastic action is required." (*Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 2001.)

Common Good. The debate over climate change is too often polarized by powerful stakeholders seeking to advance their own agendas and interests and using or misusing science for their own purposes. However, the universal nature of climate change requires a concerted and persistent effort to identify and pursue the common good on climate with an attitude of "we are all in this together." This ethic of solidarity requires us to act to protect what we hold in common, not just to protect our own interests.

Our response to climate change should demonstrate our commitment to future generations. We believe solidarity also requires that the United States lead the way in addressing this issue and in addressing the disproportionate burdens of poorer countries and vulnerable people. This is not simply a technical question of drafting legislation and fashioning agreements, but rather, a deeper question of acting effectively on our moral obligations to the weak and vulnerable and how to share blessings and burdens in this area with justice.

In building up common ground for the common good, the Catholic community is actively promoting dialogue among different sectors, interests, and groups. Recently, the Bishops' Conference working with a new Catholic Coalition on Climate Change has been a part of three state-wide gatherings in Florida, Ohio, and this past weekend in Alaska. These remarkable sessions brought together public officials, leaders from business, labor, environment and religion. Last Saturday, we heard from those already affected by climate change including the Administrator of Newtok, Alaska, which is already being destroyed by erosion, flooding, and other forces. We believe that such gatherings can create an environment of dialogue and common ground for common action on climate change.

The Catholic Church is focused on these challenges at the highest levels and on a global basis. Recently, I had the honor of representing the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at a major Vatican convening on global climate change. These themes have been a constant and persistent part of the teaching of both Pope Johns Paul II and now Benedict XVI. Pope John Paul II insisted that climate is a good that must be protected and that "it is the task of the State to provide for the defense and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces…" (*Centesimus Annus*, #40.) Pope Benedict XVI has expressed his own view saying that "{E}nvironmental pollution is making particularly unsustainable the lives of the poor of the world." (*Angelus* address on Sunday, Aug. 27, 2006.)

A Priority for the Poor. While we are "in this together," some are contributing more to the problem while others bear more of the burdens of climate change and the efforts to address it. We should look at climate change from the "bottom-up" for how it touches the poor and vulnerable. Pope Benedict XVI, in his powerful encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, insists care for "the least of these" is a defining religious duty. It is also a moral and public responsibility. The same message was just given to G-8 leaders in an unprecedented letter from the Presidents of seven Catholic bishops' conferences on June 1.[1]

With due respect for former Vice-President Gore, the real "inconvenient truth" is that those who contributed least to climate change will be affected the most; those who face the greatest threats will likely bear the greatest burdens and have the least capacity to cope or escape. We should come together to focus more on protecting the poor than protecting ourselves and promoting narrow agendas. Many cite concern for the poor on both sides of this issue. We hope that the poor will not be ignored or misused either in postponing action or choosing policies that harm the poor more than help them, or as excuses to not take action.

This passion and priority for the poor comes from Catholic teaching and our Church's experience in serving and standing with those in need. Catholic Relief Services is in 100 countries serving the poorest people on earth. We see with our own eyes that poor people in our country and in poor countries often lack the resources and capacity to adapt and avoid the negative consequences of climate change. Their lives, homes, children, and work are most at risk. Ironically, the poor and vulnerable generally contribute much less to the problem but are more likely to pay the price of neglect and delay and bear disproportionate burdens of inaction or unwise actions. We know from bitter experience who is left behind when disaster strikes.

Sadly, the voices and presence of the poor and vulnerable are often missing in the debates and decisions on climate change. This Committee and the religious community have an obligation to help make sure their voices are heard, their needs addressed, and their burdens eased as our nation and the world address climate change.

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[1] "The Summit Agenda includes global climate change, an issue of particular concern to people of faith who are committed to protecting God's creation. In this regard, we have a special concern for the poor. As a result of where they live and their limited access to resources, the poor will experience most directly the harmful effects of climate change and the burdens of any measures to address it, including potential escalating energy costs, worker displacement and health problems. This is true in our own countries as well as in Africa and elsewhere. While there are many technical aspects that need to be considered in addressing global climate change, we recognize our moral responsibility of good stewardship. Our actions and decisions, particularly those regarding our use of energy resources, have a profound effect today and on future generations. The costs of initiatives to prevent and mitigate the harmful consequences of climate change should be borne more by richer persons and nations who have benefited most from the harmful emissions that fueled development and should not be placed on the shoulders of the poor." Letter on the occasion of the G-8 Summit to leaders of the Group of 8 Countries by the Presidents of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Germany, Canada, Japan, France, England and Wales, Russia and the United States, June 1, 2007.

From an international perspective, climate change is in large part an issue of "sustainable development." The poor have a need and right to develop to overcome poverty and live in dignity. More affluent nations have a responsibility to encourage and help in this development. In light of climate change, our assistance must also help safeguard the environment we share as a human family.

This priority for the poor in climate policy cannot be a marginal concern, but rather must be a central measure of future choices. If we do not address climate change and global poverty together, we will fail both morally and practically. There can be no option for the earth without a preferential option for the poor. We cannot protect the earth and ignore the "wretched of the earth."

Therefore, responses to climate change need to provide significant new resources in addressing and overcoming poverty and providing for sustainable development at home and abroad. Under proposals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions--whether to cap and trade, adopt carbon taxes, or implement other measures—the significant resources raised should be used for public purposes, especially to reduce the disproportionate burdens of those least able to bear the impacts of climate change. A significant portion of the resources generated should be dedicated to helping low-income communities in the United States, poorer nations, vulnerable populations, and workers dislocated by climate change adjustments.

We believe ingenuity, creativity, entrepreneurship, and economic markets can play essential roles in developing the knowledge, technology, and measures to make progress and limit the damage. We also believe that wealthier industrialized nations should find effective ways to share appropriate technology and knowledge with less-developed countries as prudent policy, acts of social justice, and signs of solidarity.

Some Policy Criteria

As the Congress, the Administration, and others move from whether climate change is occurring to what to do about it, we offer some general directions and possible examples for the Committee to consider.

- Richer countries should take the lead, particularly the United States, in addressing climate change and the moral, human, and environmental costs of addressing it.
- Low-income communities and countries have the same right as we do to economic and social development to overcome poverty and need help in ways that do not harm the environment and contribute to a worsening of global climate change.
- U.S. policy should promote the policies and practices of developing countries to focus on "real" sustainable development.
- Richer countries should find suitable ways to make available appropriate technologies to low-income countries.

- Funds generated from cap and trade programs or carbon taxes should be used for public purposes with a significant portion dedicated to help the poor in our country and around the world address the costs of climate change and responses to it.

Conclusion

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops looks forward to working with this Committee and other leaders to address the moral and ethical dimensions of global climate change. We do so with both modesty and respect. While there are no easy answers, the religious community has moral principles, everyday experience, engaged people and leaders to make a constructive contribution to climate change debate and decisions. The religious community can re-affirm and re-articulate our traditional message of restraint, moderation, and sacrifice for our own good and the good of God's creation.

Today, we particularly seek your support and leadership to shape responses that respect and protect the lives and the dignity of poor families and children here and abroad. We are convinced that the moral measure of debate and decisions on climate change will be whether we act with prudence to protect God's creation, advance the common good, and lift the burdens on the poor. Both our faith and the best of our national values call us to these essential tasks.

Thank you.