

A Christian View on Climate Change

The Implications of Climate Change for Lifestyles and for EU Policies

"In fact, it's not just a question of finding techniques that can prevent environmental harms, even if it's important to find alternative sources of energy and so on. But all this won't be enough if we ourselves don't find a new style of life, a discipline which is made up in part of renunciations: a discipline of recognition of others, to whom Creation belongs just as much as those of us who can make use of it more easily; a discipline of responsibility to the future for others and for ourselves. It's a question of responsibility before Our Lord who is our Judge, and as Judge our Redeemer, but nonetheless our Judge."

Pope Benedict XVI on 6 August 2008 at a meeting with priests and deacons in Brixen, Italy

Climate change is increasingly understood to have become a question of survival for a large part of mankind. The 4th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) raises important moral and ethical issues, not just for Christians but for all concerned with the harmony of God's Creation. In its report of 2007, the IPCC estimates that without serious emission reduction policies, global temperature would likely rise by 1.6 to 6.9°C above the pre-industrial level by 2100, depending on the emissions scenario and the model that is used. To put it into perspective, the last deglaciation, which lasted several thousand years, was associated with a global temperature increase of the order of 4°C (leading to the pre-industrial temperature). And the last time the Earth was warmer by more than 2 to 3°C above the pre-industrial level was about 3 million years ago.

Although climate change will have serious impacts on Europe, its overall impacts will be even more severe in other parts of the world. The world's poorest communities with low adaptive capacities and high vulnerability will suffer a range of serious impacts. According to the IPCC, hundreds of millions of people will be exposed to water shortages and increasing drought, forcing several millions of people to migrate by the middle of this century. Up to 30% of the world's plant and animal species will be at increased risk of extinction, if global average temperature exceeds 2 to 3°C above the pre-industrial level. Increased damage from floods and storms will affect millions of people. Conflicts over dwindling resources, such as water and food, are likely to become more common and deadly. These consequences demonstrate the **necessity of limiting the temperature rise to the lowest feasible level.**

The IPCC and the Stern Report arrive at the conclusion that the costs of mitigation policies to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations at a level corresponding to the 2°C limit are comparatively small if immediate action is taken. These costs rise significantly with every year in which action is delayed. However, not doing enough would not only be unreasonable in economic terms; it would first and foremost be unpardonable from an ethical point of view: Lives lost in climate-induced disasters, or plant and animals species once extinct, cannot be restored whatever the amount of money. Even more importantly, inaction over the coming years will almost certainly make it impossible to avoid crossing climate tipping points leading to, for example, the melting of Himalayan glaciers that supply about one sixth of the global population with water, or to sea level rises well above one metre. The consequent need to relocate millions of people makes monetary scales absolutely meaningless.

Inaction is unpardonable because the actions required do not demand unacceptable sacrifices – on the contrary, they primarily require structural changes that are affordable, and changes in social practices and habits. Their costs in terms of money are well below the global annual

expenditures on armaments. The choice therefore is not between fighting climate or poverty and illness, as is sometimes argued; on the contrary, climate protection is an essential contribution to fighting malnutrition, illness, and poverty.

It must be recognised that the fight against climate change is first of all a problem of public ethos, hard to solve without challenging certain ways of organising society, without questioning the ways we live together and the value system of civil society. We should realise at once that the prevalent culture is still quite inadequate to deal with the environmental question. At the heart of this inadequacy lies the still dominant conviction according to which the environment is a mere stock of resources for humanity and, as such, not for including in the realm of ethics. This situation cannot be tolerated any longer.

Strong political leadership and, more profoundly, **ethical reflection and debate are needed** to win over not only the minds but also the hearts of citizens and to make change effective. In this latter respect the Christian ethical tradition has some interesting ideas to offer.

In recent decades Christian theology has prepared the ground for a renewed vision of God's Creation and a sharpened perception of the place and role of humankind. Theologians have frequently stressed that human beings are part of God's Creation and not its master. Human beings created in the image of God should try to understand nature in order to participate in its life and to become stewards of God's Creation.

The Catholic Church is constantly rereading the gospel and its spiritual tradition in the light of the mores and conventions of the age. Its social teaching has evolved over centuries on the basis of a set of guiding values and principles. They are, among others: respect for human dignity; aspiration for global justice and a disposition towards the weakest and for future generations; application of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, sustainability and responsibility for the common good. These values and principles can also be applied to the evaluation of climate change policies.

Climate change is an issue of justice for all Creation; it is especially an issue of **intra- and inter-generational justice**. The aspiration for global justice and special attention for the poor and for future generations are core values of Catholic social teaching.

Christians believe that all human beings are children of God which leads them to a conviction of their profound interdependence. The principle of solidarity draws on this conviction and transposes it to the ethical dimension. It covers not only individual but also collective aspects. *"The duty of promoting solidarity also falls on the shoulders of nations"*, as Pope Paul VI stated (Populorum Progressio 48). Efforts to improve or conserve the quality of the environment in the North will be of very little use without an urgent and comprehensive programme of action against world poverty. The growing gap between the rich and the poor has to be addressed. What is lacking today is leadership and a clear voice speaking out in the interest of those who already bear or will bear the highest burden of climate change: the poorest and future generations. The European Union is asked to raise its voice for them.

In order to achieve an equitable allocation of emission rights, many have suggested that each human being in the world should gradually receive the same emission rights: based on their current per capita emissions, fewer emission rights will gradually be allocated to the industrial countries, while the developing countries will increasingly be granted more emission rights

until each country achieves the same per capita rights by 2050. However, this *contraction and convergence approach* ignores the fact that the atmosphere has been freely used since the beginning of industrialisation, especially in Europe and the USA. It would therefore represent only the absolute minimum in equity terms.

Within the framework of the agreed principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, the EU bears a special responsibility for combating climate change, not only in view of the history of climate change but also in view of its technological and financial resources and its experience with cooperative action. This special responsibility has to be taken up by all industrialised countries that possess the necessary technological and financial means to combat climate change. But even if certain countries do not live up to their responsibilities for the poor and for future generations, this can not be taken as an excuse for the EU not to introduce its own necessary measures; but the EU should also make every effort to convince all actors concerned of the necessity of protecting the Earth's climate.

It is essential to keep in mind that **climate change is but one symptom of the unsustainable way of life**, modes of production and patterns of consumption that have evolved in the industrialised world. We should be asking ourselves whether the challenge of ecology is not only the pressing urgency of restructuring the present methods of production but, above all, the adoption of new lifestyles, less dependent on material goods and based much more on cultural and relational goods. The Catholic Church and all the other Christian traditions are best placed to propagate such changes in lifestyles. They can do it best through concrete proposals and by their modest examples.

In this respect, it would be an important signal to all Christians and the world if the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* and the *Kyoto Protocol* were to be ratified by the Holy See, or even if a major encyclical on environmental issues could set out the good practices of the churches as an example to others. The Church should also be to the forefront in investing its funds in ethical and sustainable projects and in developing corporate social responsibility concepts for their economic activities.

Christians are going to have to distance themselves from the lifestyle predominant in our countries which is too single-mindedly focused on consumption. We need a more comprehensive vision of human life, so that we are not seduced into pursuing selfish interests. We also need a responsible relationship with the spaces in which we live: for example, we must reconsider our mobility which, without doubt, entails high levels of energy consumption.

A significant change in lifestyles will become possible, if voluntary 'moderation' is accepted as a central virtue. Promoting the concept of moderation has the aim not of diminishing but rather of supporting a higher quality of life and a greater reason to rejoice. It is not about renouncing the desire for material goods but of discerning and better distinguishing what is essential and what is superfluous. It is necessary to demonstrate the essence of a genuine quality of life. We attain happiness primarily through good relationships: with our fellow human beings, with Creation itself and with our God, the Creator and Redeemer, the author of everything which is good.