



## Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development

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### Breath of Life: Environmental Justice & Health

“Today, however, we have to realize that a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*”

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, June 18, 2015

#### BACKGROUND

In his encyclical on human and natural ecology, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis calls on and challenges all people to protect creation and our common home. Therein Pope Francis articulates the importance of environmental justice, economic responsibility and the dignity of all life on earth in order to further land stewardship, water conservation, human health and climate action. He makes clear through the principle of “integral ecology” that care for one another and care for the earth are intimately bound together.

The encyclical has made an important contribution to our understanding of the theological and moral underpinnings that guide Catholics to environmental action. A central aspect of the Catholic vision of ecology contemplates the integration of human ecology and natural ecology expressed in *Laudato Si'* as: “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.*” The integration of human and environmental concerns lies at the center of the Church’s vision, and the needs of the poor must be prioritized. The effects on environmental degradation on human health are especially felt by the underprivileged and most vulnerable among us.

The effects of pollution on human health have a widespread impact on the poor both in the United States and around the world. Internationally, these effects include the impact of chemicals on migrant workers who move to the U.S. to live and work in contaminated areas as well as the impact of climate change as the cause for displacement and forced migration worldwide. Climate change, which corresponds to natural and mostly anthropogenic changes to the earth’s atmosphere, also has important effects on human health. Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected low-income and minority communities and researchers are exploring relationships between COVID-19 deaths and air pollution.

#### CURRENT ISSUES OF CONCERN

Catholics are called to care for God’s gift of creation and to protect the most vulnerable among us. Caught in a spiral of poverty and environmental degradation, the poor and the powerless bear a disproportionate burden of the effects of exposure to environmental problems, as their lands and neighborhoods are more likely to be polluted, to be near toxic waste dumps, or to suffer from water contamination. Pope Francis reminds us that, “each year hundreds of millions of tons of waste are generated, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from homes and businesses, from construction and demolition sites, from clinical, electronic and industrial sources. The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (*LS* no. 21).

The U.S. bishops promote prudent action predicated on justice to address the growing impact of global climate change. As the bishops note in *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, “Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice.”

National standards to reduce toxins and carbon pollution represent an important opportunity to protect the

health and welfare of all people, especially children, the unborn, the elderly and poor and vulnerable communities. The U.S. Bishops have offered multiple testimonies and letters to Congress and government agencies outlining moral principles to guide environmental policy and action. These principles include: care for creation, promotion of the common good, respect for the human person, and a priority for those who are poor and vulnerable.

Over the last few years, the Trump Administration has proposed the rollback of several policies that protect the environment and human health. Among the most significant rollback proposals are the reduction in the scope of the EPA to regulate greenhouse gases as proposed in the Clean Power Plan and softening of fuel emission standards for vehicles. Together, power generation and transportation account for almost 50% of US carbon emissions, and the reduction of standards proposed by the Administration will lead to significant increases in emissions and negative consequences for public health and climate change mitigation. The USCCB has submitted comments challenging the Clean Power Plan and fuel emission standard rollbacks and has advocated against these anti-environmental measures.

A new rule was proposed to reduce emissions standards for mercury and other hazardous air pollutants emitted by power plants due to the costs involved. The EPA estimates that these standards prevent up to 11,000 premature deaths annually. Children—born and unborn—are particularly vulnerable to mercury pollution as it is known to interfere with their developing nervous systems. Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) regulation is vitally important for the protection of human life and dignity, especially in its most vulnerable forms. The USCCB intends to oppose the weakening of MATS regulation once the rule is published.

Climate change is one of the greatest environmental threats we face. The USCCB has long supported bi-partisan efforts in Congress that aim at curbing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting climate adaptation domestically and abroad. On January 24<sup>th</sup> of 2019, H.R. 763 Energy Innovation & Carbon Dividend Act was introduced in congress, the first bipartisan carbon-pricing proposal since 2009. Bishop Frank J. Dewane, Bishop Frank Dewane, chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development of the USCCB stated on January 25<sup>th</sup>, “Fundamentally, this bill is about ensuring that the full spectrum of costs associated with greenhouse gas emissions—economic, social, and environmental—are accounted for. Failing to consider the health and well-being of people, including future generations and the planet, means that ‘businesses profit by calculating and paying only a fraction of the costs involved’ (Laudato Si’, no. 195).” The USCCB will continue to advocate for bi-partisan solutions that address climate change.

Congress has an important role in safeguarding the U.S. government’s responsibility of being stewards of natural resources. Every year Congress must appropriate funding for federal agencies and programs that care for the environment, such as the EPA and Department of the Interior. In bi-partisan fashion, over the last few years congress has been successful in increasing or maintaining funding for environmental stewardship. The USCCB has advocated for full funding for these agencies, and will continue to do so for the new congress.

## RESOURCES

- USCCB Environmental Justice Program: [usccb.org/environment](https://usccb.org/environment)
- Catholic Charities USA: [catholiccharitiesusa.org/](https://catholiccharitiesusa.org/)
- Catholic Relief Services climate change stories at: [crs.org/climate-change](https://crs.org/climate-change)
- Catholic Climate Covenant at: [catholicclimatecovenant.org/](https://catholicclimatecovenant.org/)

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