“Always Be Ready to Give...a Reason for Your Hope...”—1 Peter 3: 15b

by Dawn M. Nothwehr, O.S.F.

Do an internet search on “climate change” and you get 76,300,000 hits; search for “global warming” and you get 31,100,000. Indeed, climate change and global warming are signs of our time. Following upon the release of the Fifth Assessment Report (AR5) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the U.S. government released its Third National Climate Assessment (NCA) on May 6, 2014. Distinctive about the NCA was: (1) It followed unprecedented natural disasters—heat waves, droughts, hurricanes, wildfires, and flooding—that left no section of the U.S. unscathed; and (2) It outlined in great detail, but distilled in a “Fact Sheet,” how local conditions of all the eight regions of the United States would be affected by increasingly more extreme weather and other events that would change the climate.

The NCA confirms climate change is already affecting the entire United States and key sectors of its economy and society. The need to tackle climate change threats and increase community preparedness and resilience throughout the country is immediate and urgent because:

- extreme weather and climate events have increased in recent decades, some of which are related to human activities;
- human-induced climate change is projected to continue and will accelerate significantly if global emissions keep increasing;
- climate-related impacts are evident in many sectors and are expected to become increasingly disruptive;
- climate change threatens human health and wellbeing, including through extreme weather events and wildfires, decreased air quality, and diseases transmitted by insects, food, and water;
- sea-level rise, heavy downpours, and extreme heat are damaging and will continue to damage infrastructure with ongoing climate change;

2 Find the full report, report highlights, educational and interactive resources at National Climate Assessment at http://nca2014.globalchange.gov/.

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• climate change is jeopardizing water quality and water supply reliability, which is affecting ecosystems and livelihoods;
• climate disruptions to agriculture have been increasing and their severity is projected to increase;
• climate change poses particular threats to indigenous peoples’ health, wellbeing, and ways of life;
• the capacity of ecosystems to withstand the impacts of extreme events, such as fires, floods and severe storms, is being overburdened;
• oceans are warming and increasing in acidity, which is affecting ocean circulation, chemistry, ecosystems and marine life;
• and while adaptation and mitigation planning is increasing, implementation efforts are inadequate to avoid the negative social, environmental, and economic consequences of climate change.

Beyond the NCA, the past several months have seen many important climate change-related initiatives. A brief sampling of these events yields reason for both frustration and hope.

• The April 2014 study of public understanding of the existence of global warming and its causes by The Yale Project on Science and Society showed that overall, public acceptance of human causes for global warming is currently up 5 percent above the rate assessed in May 2011.3

• Yale’s April 2014 report also showed only 12 percent of Americans know that 90 percent or more of climate scientists have concluded global warming is happening and human-caused.4

• In an unprecedented effort, from May 2-6 2014, the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences held a joint workshop on climate change and sustainable development. The two Academies and invited experts studied human needs—food, health, and energy—seeking various pathways that both serve those needs and reveal constraints on nature’s ability to meet them.5

• In 2013, US oil demand dramatically reversed course, growing to 18.9 million barrels of oil a day (a 400,000 barrels per day increase) compared to China’s 10.8 million barrels a day (390,000 barrels a day increase). A similar increase is anticipated for 2014.6

• May 29, 2014, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops sent a letter to Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Gina McCarthy in support of strengthening the agency’s carbon emission standards for existing power plants.7

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4 Cook and colleagues (2013) examined nearly 12,000 peer-reviewed papers in the climate science literature and found a 97 percent consensus among those papers that stated a position on the reality of human-caused global warming.
An unusual bipartisan alliance including George P. Shultz, Henry M. Paulson Jr., and Robert E. Rubin said that the country—and business leaders in particular—must wake up to the enormous scale of the economic risk involved in global warming and climate change.8

On July 11, 2014, the World Council of Churches, which represents over half a billion Christians worldwide, decided to pull its investments out of fossil fuel companies.9

In spite of some seemingly positive developments, even as more people accept and experience the real impacts of climate change, haunting and sobering questions bear down on us: Are we acting soon enough and strong enough? Even under the best conditions, are we simply doing “too little, too late?” Where can we find genuine reason for hope in this picture? These questions challenge the faith, spirit, and psyche of the People of God and church ministers of all kinds. On the practical side, ministers can gain insight from three recent scenarios.

Collision of Beliefs and Facts

Perhaps the most perplexing for ministers is that even though more people know that there is at least a 90 percent consensus among climate scientists that climate change is real and human caused, and that there is overwhelming scientific data in support of that, they just are not willing to endorse the agreement. According to Yale Law School professor Dan Kahn, religious and political identity trumps knowledge of factual and scientific evidence.10 Scientific evidence alone is ineffective in reducing misconceptions on climate change. So what can ministers and teachers do to break through misguided religious identities (in light of Catholic social teaching on climate change and environmental issues)?

First, fundamental catechesis on the reign of God and the Christian’s primary identity as one loyal to both of its dimensions—“the here,” as well as the “not yet”—must be stressed, in light of the Church’s teaching on the unified nature of the doctrines of creation and redemption. This opens up the moral requirement that Christians need to care for the earth, their neighbors, as well as worship God. There needs to be congruence between one’s personal, spiritual, social, and political actions. At the same time, ministers need to be savvy about the incentives various elites have for spreading misinformation.11 When teaching about climate change, it is most effective to use examples of changes already occurring and developing in local ecosystems to illustrate the serious nature of the problem (See the regional sections of the NCA). At their deepest core, people get involved with issues because they see their values and ideals are at stake. This requires teachers and ministers to help people “connect the dots” between climate change and Catholic identity, doing careful catechesis on moral values found in scripture, the sacraments, or orthodox teachings on creation, eschatology, or soteriology—as well as Catholic social teaching.

Scientists Coping with Impending Realities

Secondly, we can learn from those directly involved in scientific and technological work aimed at halting or mitigating warming effects, and who often suffer psychologically and spiritually. Three such scientists recently dis-

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cussed coping with the current and impending life-threatening destruction of ecosystems and living things. Terry Root, Senior Fellow—Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, who studies how animals and plants handle climate change explained:

Some of them are going to be species that we need. How do we know what species we need ahead of time? We can't save them all. That's why I get into triage...I just had a discussion on the phone with my boyfriend about how much longer can I do what I’m doing,...I mean all I do all day long is think about how species are going extinct. It is tough. It truly is tough.

For Abigail Derby, a conservation ecologist at Chicago's Field Museum, it is sobering to realize that the world's sixth extinction of species is in progress. But, this extinction is happening faster than all others in geological history, and it is driven by human actions. However, because it is human driven, it can possibly be halted by changing toxic human behavior. What each person does or does not do, matters a lot! We know what we need to do. If we act now we can avoid a tragic future. Current and developing technologies can be brought to scale to help us. Yet we need to learn to think about time and space differently—beyond the immediate moment or the next election—to 10, 20, or 100 years into the future.

Psychological Impacts and Preparedness

Finally, the June 2014 study “Beyond Storms & Droughts: the Psychological Impacts of Climate Change” by the American Psychological Association and the nonprofit organization ecoAmerica shows the impacts of climate change on Americans’ health and psychological well-being.

1. The report provides guidance to communities about how to prepare for and communicate about psychological impacts and encourage future research on the issue. Three major findings will continue to challenge everyone, particularly ministers, teachers, and those in helping professions.

2. Climate change currently affects and will continue to have significant impacts on Americans’ health and psychological well-being as climate change accelerates (2014 NCA). Likely impacts include: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); distress, depression, and anxiety; hopelessness; increases in violence, aggression, and crime; and strains on social relationships.

3. Everyone will be affected by climate's psychological impacts, but children, women, and communities with fewer resources will be especially vulnerable.

4. While the psychological impacts of climate change will be significant, communities and individuals can take action to prepare for them by strengthening existing social groups and networks. Taking steps to prepare for the psychological impacts can also bring other benefits; communities can strengthen preparation for natural disasters and climate change by collaborating across organizations to integrate planning for mental health impacts into existing disaster preparation efforts.

Throughout this report, faith-based groups and religious professionals are mentioned as resource persons.

12 Shannon Heffernan, “After Water: ‘How Do You Sleep at Night?’ A Writer Asks Climate Scientists How They Cope,” July 20, 2014, http://www.wbez.org/series/front-and-center-water/after-water-how-do-you-sleep-night-110529. Root said that if we get to 2 degrees warmer, we could lose 20 to 40 percent of all the known species on the planet. If we get to 4 degrees warmer then we could lose as many as half.

13 Heffernan, “After Water.”


The Reason for Our Hope

Though the challenges of climate change continue to be daunting, we can take courage from our ancestors in faith who often “walked in faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). Indeed, God’s never failed us yet! With hope-filled hearts, let us join Pope Francis and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in their declaration:

It is our profound conviction that the future of the human family depends also on how we safeguard—both prudently and compassionately, with justice and fairness—the gift of creation that our Creator has entrusted to us. Therefore, we acknowledge in repentance the wrongful mistreatment of our planet, which is tantamount to sin before the eyes of God. We reaffirm our responsibility and obligation to foster a sense of humility and moderation so that all may feel the need to respect creation and to safeguard it with care. Together, we pledge our commitment to raising awareness about the stewardship of creation; we appeal to all people of goodwill to consider ways of living less wastefully and more frugally, manifesting less greed and more generosity for the protection of God’s world and the benefit of His people.¹⁶