

Climate change, Moral Integrity and Catholic Responses

By Rev Dr Charles Rue, FEN Climate Change Series June 2007
Columban Mission Society Australian Coordinator JPICoz

Jesus taught in parables. I am grateful to Bishop Jones, Anglican bishop of Liverpool, for this parable. A family was chosen to go on a free world cruise. They could not believe their luck and kept asking, is it really free? Reassured that it was, they embarked. The facilities on the ship were first class – meals, swimming, music. One day on meeting the captain they again asked, is it really free? They were assured it was. The ship sailed on visiting the Antarctic, exotic islands. When the family met the captain again they asked him how many people were on board. He replied, 200. But, they replied, only 200 on such a large ship? He said, well actually, there are 200 enjoying A deck, but there are 800 on starvation rations down in B deck.

That ship represents the world. The parable tells of the divide between the haves and have-nots, between the rich nations and struggling countries, 200 on A deck, 800 down in B deck. This divide in our world between rich and poor is a major moral question that has been with us for some decades. We have not done too well.

But Climate Change, as outlined by Mark Diesendorf last week and Chris Riedy tonight, ups the anti. The consequences of Climate Change are starting to bite so that the whole ship Earth is in trouble. Frightening though it is to begin the task of reducing world use of fossil fuels, cutting greenhouse gases that flow through to Climate Change, and changing to alternatives fuels, the moral imperative falls primarily on us on A deck who have the technology and the resources to tackle the task. Our moral integrity is at stake - poor nations will suffer the most from Climate Change yet they contributed the least. As a nation we have the choice to make the change-over to renewable energy for both A and B decks.

We might object: can you expect me to redo my business plan? An office worker might say I have only a few years to go until I get my super. A worker might say, I have a secure job and its only jobs that matter. The manager of a faith based school getting subsidies from the government might say don't expect us to cause ripples. Adapting the words of Winston Churchill, our nation is on an era of procrastination to be followed by an era of consequences. Climate Change is the biggest challenge to the moral integrity our nation has ever faced, a challenge not just to politicians but to Australian society and its faith communities.

The teachings of Dr Kublur Ross on death and dying has some lessons for us. We are challenged by the fact that the pattern of life we knew is dying as the planet warms. Do we respond like the dying person with denial, anger, blaming others and bargaining? Or can we go past that stage to commit ourselves to vote for and create a new pattern of living that carries moral integrity?

I suggest three parts in our faith response to climate-change: one, telling the truth about climate change; secondly, exploring our faith to motivate change; thirdly, taking personal and political action to set new ways of living that respect Earth's climate systems.

First, about truth: A few weeks back I was at a Seminar on Climate Change and Development in Rome. Cardinal Martino, as head of the Vatican's Peace and Justice Commission, invited 80 delegates to gather data. A scientist from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) summarised its 2007 Reports. While the detail is immense, the message is simple – reverse human induced Climate Change or bear the consequences. That is the truth to be faced. The environmental ministers of the UK and France appealed to the churches to offer moral criteria and motivation. The UK's Milliband called for a new 'Environmental Contract' similar to history's Social Contract.

However, half the participants at the Vatican seminar were climate skeptics including (Viscount Monkton, Dr. Idso from the oil company financed CO2 Institute and) Prof. Fred Singer, former tobacco lobbyist now employed by the oil companies. Mark Diesendorf prefers to call them contrarians since they give honest skeptics a bad name. The contrarian litany:

- climate change is merely the result of natural cycles;
- the IPCC uses models that is not real science;
- make the poor nations rich so they can afford to adapt to Climate Change;
- blame China's factories and Indonesian forest fires;
- nuclear energy, clean coal and bio-fuels [GM?] are the best alternatives.

Their contorted lies were almost funny, but their PR litany sows the confusion that leads to paralysis. In the name of truth climate sceptics need to be publicly opposed.

Sadly, many with vested interests play on the good will and faith of ordinary people. Under the banner of 'concern for the poor' they oppose carbon taxes. They pervert the religious word 'stewardship' and claim that 'more CO2 is good'. They piously ask, how could humans be so presumptuous as to think that can change the climate and divert God's providence? In truth climate scpetics go against two decades of Catholic environmental teaching and their perversion of faith needs to be exposed, Cardinal Pell included. I borrow a line from the Goons – its not bats in the belfry, the bats have taken over the belfry. (God's will is to purify this evil world says Rev. Calvin Beissner. Archbishop Pat Kelly of Liverpool directly opposed an eccentric Italian scientist saying that there is little place for science that is removed from the real lives of people. Religious leaders who denigrate environmentalists as nature worshipers or hysterical must be exposed as deviating from Catholic teaching.)

Secondly, about moral criteria and faith motivation: Thankfully, many at the Rome Seminar rejected the litany of the climate skeptics. Many bishops were impressive saying they wanted to build a pastoral response to Climate Change in their local communities and to actively enter the public debate. With leaders for the World Council of Churches (WCC) they called for a Papal encyclical on the environment and a common statement on Climate Change by church leaders. They said, draw on the Church's social teaching to offer cogent ethical criteria:

- the right of all people to a safe environment as taught by John Paul II,
- the rights of future generations,
- fair distribution of climate change abatement costs,
- solidarity with developing countries by sharing modern technology uninhibited by patenting laws,
- welcome environmental refugees, and
- dismantle the social structures of sin as taught by John Paul II
- human ecology and natural ecology cannot be separated says Pope Benedict (2007 New Year).

At a theological level, the positive role of Earth itself in the story of Christian salvation is the orthodox Christian tradition - the outpouring of God's love in creation is inseparably linked to its culmination in the saving work of Jesus; the earth is good, revealing of God and integral to Christian prayer. Eight centuries ago St Thomas Aquinas taught that Earth's diversity opens a spiritual path to appreciating the fullness of God's own self. Sadly, in recent times an almost exclusive Gospel focus on the human, and fundamentalist notions about Scripture and science have given the church a bad name. This must be admitted, and corrected.

Thirdly about Action: In addition to being 'truth tellers', offering moral criteria and providing spiritual motivation, church teaching calls for action. Faith without good works is dead. Chris has shown us how practical action can change our transport patterns, and this a moral imperative, sin issue. So:

1. In a Federal election year, the Australian Catholic bishops need to be encouraged from the pews to publicly build upon their 2005 Climate Change position paper. They could talk of green jobs and a green economy, respect for Earth itself as an act of prayer.
2. Believers need to pound on the doors of all Federal electoral hopefuls demanding policies that set up an equitable framework for citizens to take immediate and significant decisions on climate change for their businesses, jobs, homes and personal life.
3. Next year Australian Catholics will host a World Youth Day in Sydney. The universal issue of Climate Change would be a worthy spiritual reflection leading to morally responsible action.

The 200 on A deck need to work in solidarity with the 800 on B deck. This one planet is our common home and is heading into the troubled waters of Climate Change. How we listen to what Earth is saying, radically cut our carbon emissions, and forge new ways of living makes for a solid test of our moral integrity and spiritual maturity.

We can be encouraged to move forward by Cardinal Martino who in his closing address to the Roman Seminar said, 'This reflection deepens doctrinal reflection as Gospel meets life in society ... the Gospel is always new, adapting as historical conditions change.'