

Marching for Climate Justice

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Today, December 10th 2014, is world Human Rights Day, I spent three hours attending a climate march through the heart of Lima with my fellow Columban missionaries, Noel Kerins, Liam Carey, Gabriel Rojas, Eamanuel Trocino, Louise Ybanez, Amy Echeverria, Cesar Correa and Bernie Lane Both Bernie and Noel were my guides and translators at various times during the march. The march was organised by a coalition of groups which included indigenous people, trade unions, environmental and faith groups. Between 6,000 and 8,000 took part many came from right across the globe.

The March began around 10.30am at the Campo de Marte in the heart of Lima and ended some three hours later at the Plaza San Martin. The vast majority came from Latin American countries, especially Peru itself, Ecuador, Bolivia and Brazil. One participant from Ecuador told me that he and his group had spent 30 hours in a bus in order to be present at the march to show their concern for what was happening in their area. From my middle class perspective, I can only marvel at the sacrifices involved in making such a journey for people with little access to money or food.

On the march I met people from Australia, protesting that the government of Prime Minister Abbot was not taking environmental issues seriously, especially climate. One of the Australian women whom I met was completing a Ph.D thesis at the University of Queensland on the social effects of mining. The message on her T-shirts had an Aussie directness about it: “Australia should be ashamed, Abbot is a fossil,” I rubbed shoulders with people from Taiwan, the Philippines, the United States, Canada and indigenous people from the Amazon.

Though police in riot gear were present, the march was very good natured, even though people who were stuck in traffic on Lima's already congested streets didn't always appreciate what was happening. One on-looker thought that the march was stupid because it was causing a major traffic jam, but massive traffic jams are a daily experience here in Lima, as the road network is completely inadequate for the volume of traffic which daily pours on to the streets of Lima each day. On a number of days last week, it took two hours to reach the COP premises which are located in a military base in San Borja in the more affluent part of Lima.

The carnival atmosphere of the march was enhanced by people playing drums of all shapes and sizes. Stilt walkers worked their way nimbly in and out through the crowd, adding their larger-than-life presence to the affable nature of the event. Brass bands playing popular tunes brought sound and colour to the march. Interspersed through the march there were people with megaphones calling out slogans such as "a people united cannot be defeated." They asked the marchers – "what do we want" and together with one voice everyone responded, "climate justice." To the question, "When do we want it,?" an avalanche of sound came back. "Now."

There was a huge contrast between the marchers, most of who were from rural communities, and the official negotiators at COP 20 on the other side of city, most of whom wore suits and collar-and-ties during the first week of the negotiations. For one thing, I think it would be fair to say that most of the negotiators had never directly experienced a climate event, or known people who had been murdered because of the stance they had taken on an environmental issues. Many of the marchers had watched their rivers being polluted by legal or illegal mining activity or seen their forests decimated by loggers, with appalling destruction for biodiversity.

At COP 20, as the negotiators were pouring over intricate and complex issues, the basic texts were ballooning exponentially. The views of the marchers were much simpler. Many wore T-shirts emblazoned with pithy slogans demanding climate justice and human rights. The focus of the marchers was not merely on climate change, it touched on a wide spectrum of other issues, from protecting water sources, to stopping logging and mining. Among the placards were the following Aqua si, Oro, No! Water, yes, Gold No! Other read, "Change the System, not the Climate." Many placard called for "100% Clean Energy," while one carried by a group from the Peruvian Amazon read, "Chevron should not take oil without first consulting us," The corruption of some government officials was targeted by a group representing municipal workers. Their banner read, "Municipal dumps poison cities, while corrupt mayors don't pay workers a just wage."

In the past Evangelical Churches paid little attention to environmental issues, and some times appeared to be used by multinationals, intent on getting access to local natural resources, so I was delighted to see many evangelical groups from various countries in Latin America. Some of their banners called on everyone to "protect God's creation and one with some old-fashioned fire and brimstone ring, warned that "Christ would Destroy those who Destroy the Environment." Needless to say, the Archbishop of Lima, Cardinal Cipriani was not on the march, but people associate with the Bartolome des las Casas were present. A banner carried by one indigenous group called for "the protection of indigenous people who love the Earth: Don't allow corporations to destroy Mother Earth." Women's groups were also represented: The message from one group was that they will keep marching until all women were free from violence.

At the end of the march a number of speakers, representing different countries and continents, address the crowd. Whether the speaker was from Africa or an indigenous person from the Andes, there was a common thread to their demands. They called on their governments to stop selling out their mineral, oil, water, lands or timber resources to powerful multinational corporations, who are mainly interested in maximizing profits, not caring for people or the environment. The interests of ordinary people and the integrity of the earth should be the prime focus of all governments at both national and local level.

Above all they called on the negotiators at COP 20 to develop an ambitious, robust, legally binding and inclusive treaty on climate change which would ensure that future generations would inherit a world as beautiful and fruitful as the one this generation inherited. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that this will happen. In fact, as the march was taking place, the possibilities of such an outcome was beginning to unravel at COP 20. The U.S. and the E.U. were at loggerheads over the legally binding element of the agreement. U.S. negotiators realise that the possibility of the U.S. Senate dominated by Republicans signing a climate treaty is nil. The incoming Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell fought his recent election on the platform of – Freedom, Guns and Coal. Friction has developed between developed and developing nations about how to raise money to fund the Global Environment Facility which needs to raise \$100 billion per annum by 2020 to fund adaptation programmes. On this issue Ireland is seen to be dragging its feet! It is the only OECD country which has not made any financial pledge so far. Whether agreement on these and other issues will be hammered out today and tomorrow is anyone's guess. Prayers are needed and Watch this space!