

Religions and Climate Change

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I have been at many meetings of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) during the past decade. At almost all of these meetings religious groups have attempted to demonstrate that climate change has a serious ethical and religious dimension, mainly because it affects the poor and important ecosystems in a very negative way.

After visiting Nepal in May 2014, Ms Christiana Figueres the Secretary General of UNFCCC pointed out that, saving the Earth and its peoples from dangerous climate change is a moral and ethical issue, one that goes to the core of the world's great faiths. She said that it was time for faith and religious institutions to find their voice and set their moral compass on one of the great humanitarian issues of our time.

At COP 20 in Lima, the Consejo Interreligioso del Perú (the Council for Interreligious Dialogue) Religiones por la Paz (Religions for Peace) had a stand at the main venue and also sponsored a seminar at the NGO Centre at the Jockey Club of Peru. The title of the seminar was Climate Change and the Voice of the Faith Communities. The first speaker was Mons. Salvador Pineiro, the archbishop of Ayacucho and the President of the Episcopal Conference of Peru. He said that he was a city boy, born in Lima and had little understanding of rural life until he was appointed archbishop of Ayacucho. In conversation with a poor potato farmer he learned how climate changes was affecting the potato crop and making things more difficult for farmers during the past decade. Raquel Cago, who is the executive director of the National Union of Evangelical Churches, said that the bible challenges Christians to take good care of God's creation. Martin Kopp from the Federation of Lutheran Churches spoke very simply and succinctly about how the faith community should

respond to climate change.. He made three suggestions: The most important thing for Churches and Religions is to develop a credible theology of creation in each of their traditions: His second recommendation was that the faith community must work together and lobby governments and industries to challenge them to take climate change seriously at local, national and global level. We need good laws and effective enforcement of these laws to protect the poor and the environment: Finally, people need to do things however small to combat climate change. He gave an example of a choir in a Church in France. The members used to meet in the church for rehearsals even during the winter. This meant heating the large church, even through there were only a few people in the choir. Someone suggested they met in a smaller room and thus save energy and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Martin Kopp is also heavily involved the fasting for climate movement. At a vigil on November 30th 2014, Christiana Figueres and the COP president Manuel Pulgar-Vidal lit a candle to begin the celebration of the first year of monthly Fasting for Climate Change. The final speaker, Valeriane Bernard, spoke on behalf of the Spiritual University of the Global Brahma Kumaris (BKWSU). She highlighted the unity of creation and the challenge to all religions to address the tsunami of consumption which is destroying peoples' lives and the natural world. Meditation has an important role to play in developing our new consciousness.

Although the seminar was very successful and of all the speakers were excellent only a handful of people attended the event. For me, this underlines the sad reality that the majority of religious people have not really taken on board the magnitude of the ecological crisis and the urgency with which it must be addressed. That point was reinforced on December 6th 2014. A Mass to mark COP 20 was celebrated in the Church of St. Anthony of Padua in Lima. While seven bishops concelebrated, there were less than 100 people in the Church.

The main celebrant, Mons. Salvador Pineiro, Archbishop of Ayacucho and President of the Catholic Episcopal Conference of Peru, did not even refer to the environment in his homily, not to mention climate change. This was very disappointing, but it is where most people in the faith community are, so there is a huge challenge to convince them that the environment, God's creation, is important.

On the December 9th 2014, a seminar on sustainable development was held at the Jesuit university in Lima called Antonio Ruiz de Montoya. The main speaker was Jeffrey Sacks. His topic was the need to move from a predatory form of capitalism to living on the planet in a sustainable way. I was a panel member at a conference on ecotheology.

On the evening of December 9th 2014, the Council for Interreligious dialogue and Religions for Peace hosted a Vigil at the Basilica of St. Francis in Lima. The vigil featured testimonies from people who are already affected by climate change, a call to repentance for the profligate way we are living, especially in the way we use fossil fuel. There were prayers, songs and dances. A letter was read out addressed to the president of COP 20, Manuel Pulgar-Videl demanding a new deal on climate change be achieved at COP 20 in Lima. I have it on very good authority that the papal nuncio to Peru phoned the Franciscan superior asking why this event was been held at the Basilica. So, despite almost two year of the papacy of Pope Francis, some people still do not understand what he is trying to do.

Lack of real interest by Church leader in environmental issues is not confined to countries such as Peru. In early October 2014, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference reissued and brought up-to-date a document on climate change entitled, *The Cry of the Earth*. It was originally written in 2009 in preparation for COP 16 in Copenhagen. At that time, the document was not really given

prominence in Catholic circles. We were promised in 2014 that the document would be widely disseminate this time right across the Irish Catholic Church in parishes and schools. Unfortunately, little has happened apart from an article written by Bishop William Crean in *The Irish Times*, “Climate change a moral issue for all humanity,”¹ At the meeting with the Irish delegation at COP 20, in Lima on December I asked the head of the Irish delegation whether she had heard of the document. Her answer was. no. Both myself and Dr. John Sweeney, one of the other authors of the document who was also at the meeting, were deeply disappointed that the document had been widely disseminated.

Thankfully, Pope Francis is giving clear leadership in this area. In his message to the President of COP 20, Manuel Pulgar-Vidal, Pope Francis expressed his closeness and encouragement, that the work being done at COP 20. He hoped that the meeting would be undertaken with an open and generous mind. He added that He add that what they are discussing affects all humanity, especially the poor and future generations. Even more so, the Pope stressed, it is a serious ethical and moral responsibility.

The Holy Father noted that the conference was taking place on the coastline adjacent to the maritime current of Humboldt, which unites , as he put it, the peoples of America, Oceania and Asia, in a symbolic embrace and which plays a key role in the climate of the entire planet.

The consequences of environmental change, said Pope Francis remind us of the severity of neglect and inaction on this issue and he warned that “the time to find global solutions is running out.”

¹ Bishop William Crean. “Climate change a moral issue for all humanity,” *The Irish Times*, October 7th 2014, page 16.

But, he also underlined that, “we can find solutions only if we act together and agree.” There is therefore, a clear, definitive and urgent ethical imperative to act, he said.²

Pope Francis concluded his message by saying that the effective fight against global warming will only be possible through a collective response and develops free from political and economic pressures.

² *Pope: Climate Change a serious ethical and moral responsibility*, 2014-12-11 Vatican Radio