The Missing Voice of the Poor in the Climate Change Debate

By: Cecilia Calvo

Climate change is a hot topic this election year. A growing majority of Americans believe that climate change is real and that steps must be taken now to address it. This is one reason that climate change has become a key issue in this election. The Catholic Bishops of the United States insist in *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good* that "the debate about how the United States is responding to questions and challenges surrounding global climate change is a test and an opportunity for our nation."

Our response to climate change raises fundamental questions of morality and justice, fairness and shared sacrifice. As Catholics our faith calls us to care for *all* of God's creation, especially the "least of these" (Mt 25:40). Caring for God's creation means not only saving the animals and trees, but protecting humanity as well. Of particular concern to the Church is how climate change and the response to it will affect poor and vulnerable people here at home and around the world. The bishops' document *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* urges Catholics to consider environmental issues before going to vote.

In the bishops' statement, *Global Climate Change,* the Bishops present three ethical priorities as the foundation for debate on this issue in this election year:

- **prudence,** which requires wise action now to address problems that will grow in their magnitude and consequences;
- "bold and generous action on behalf of the **common good**" rather than the demands of narrow interests, and
- a clear priority **for the poor,** who will bear the greatest burdens and pay the greatest price for the consequences and costs of climate change.

Significant levels of scientific consensus demonstrate that climate change is real and that the consequences of inaction are serious. The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change concluded that the costs of climate change are likely to be significant and to increase over time as average global temperature increases (IPCC, Fourth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2007). IPCC projected impacts of climate change include:

- increased drought, storm intensity, disease, species extinction, and flooding

- increased deaths, disease and injury due to heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts
- hundreds of millions of people exposed to increased water stress
- increases in malnutrition and other disorders, with implications for child growth and development.

Developing countries are expected to suffer most severely from the negative effects of climate change. Increased drought, storm intensity, disease, species extinction and flooding will only exacerbate the living conditions of those already impoverished. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops testified before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, "The real 'inconvenient truth' is that those who contribute least to climate change will be affected the most and have the least capacity to cope or escape. The poor and vulnerable are most likely to pay the price of inaction or unwise actions. We know from our everyday experience their lives, homes, children, and work are most at risk."

Although experts may not fully agree about the long-term effects of climate change, most believe that action is needed to slow its current impact and arrest its future effects. The Catholic community's distinct moral perspective on this issue will enrich the debate in this election and benefit our nation. Many resources are available reflecting the moral and ethical dimensions of climate change (See http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/climate/ and www.catholicsandclimatechange.org).

Protecting God's creation and "the least of these" requires urgent, wise and bold action. The good news is that both presidential candidates agree that climate change is real and requires a serious and sustained effort to mitigate and reduce future damage. The bad news is that discussion of climate change's disproportionate effect on poor people is still missing from the debate. Catholic voters should urge candidates to address the needs of the poor and vulnerable in climate change policy and decisions.

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