Renew the Face of the Earth: An Urgent Catholic Call to Energy Transition

Psalm 104 says “Lord send out your spirit and renew the face of the Earth.” Last week Pope Francis met with major fossil fuel executives and investors at the Vatican.¹ As U.S. Catholic religious leaders, we support Pope Francis’ recent urgent plea to these companies and investors to a renewable energy transition. In support of this global effort, we call on the U.S. Senate to pass the International Climate Accountability Act, which is a companion to the recently passed Climate Action Now Act (HR9). We also support an equitable pricing mechanism on carbon pollution along with financial resources toward an ambitious national transition to a renewable energy economy.

Renewing the face of the Earth has taken on a new sense of urgency as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified the deadline for meaningful counteraction of Climate change as 2030. On May 28th of this year, Pope Francis addressed climate change and new evidence from the fields of science, engineering, and policy to an audience of finance ministers from around the world. He stated unequivocally, “The effects of global inaction are startling.” The address came just over 4 years since his encyclical, Laudato Si was published to coincide with the feast of Pentecost in 2015. Pope Francis echoed to the audience that the original intent of the document was to encourage the economies of the world to achieve the United Nations Sustainability Goals and fulfill the imperative of what became the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement.

As a country, we must significantly redirect our steps. Too often we exacerbate rising global temperatures and poverty conditions in the communities that we serve. These realities combine to create life-threatening situations. Yet, the concerns of those most struggling continue to be excluded from the national conversation around corrective action. For example, farmers from Central America are increasingly moving North to the United States because the current climate has produced conditions unsuitable for a viable harvest.² Meanwhile, the U.S. administration makes poverty worse in Central America by cutting humanitarian aid. Further, as summer approaches, we are reminded that rising global temperatures and carbon emissions are directly linked in the U.S. and beyond to increased asthma rates in inner-city children, heat exhaustion and stroke among outdoor laborers and the homeless, and these stresses have a compounding effect on the elderly and chronically ill populations.

Tragically, despite repeated calls for action, the federal government of the United States has regressed even in its initial commitments to the Paris Climate Change Agreement. Efforts to censor (even alter) the cumulative evidence of the impact of greenhouse gases on the climate and executive actions to undermine the precedent of environmental protections from previous administrations are alarming. They further give evidence to an unhelpful alliance between the financial motives of some primary polluters and key actors in some of the government institutions trusted to safeguard us from its negative impacts. This is further confirmed by a recent report from Brown University on the costs of war which found that the U.S. military is the “largest institutional consumer of fossil fuels in the world.”³

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³ Neta Crawford, “Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and Costs of War,” Watson Institute, Brown University, June 12, 2019. [https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/ClimateChangeandCostofWar](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/papers/ClimateChangeandCostofWar)
We have a responsibility to be caretakers of our natural world and to preserve our ecosystems to meet the needs of future generations. In a desire to reaffirm our commitment to advocate on behalf of the most vulnerable, we wish to express our emphatic support for the passage of measures that will recommit this country to the aspirations of the Paris Climate Agreement. According to the International Energy Agency, the United States is second in the world in both total carbon emissions and per capita carbon emissions. It is our moral responsibility to expedite an end to our dependence upon a fossil fuel economy while concurrently investing in a transition to a renewable energy economy. The Climate Action Now Act (HR9) and the International Climate Accountability Act are current attempts to recommit the U.S. to its Paris promises.

In addition to the Paris commitments, we wish to emphatically support Pope Francis’ integrated approach to the climate crisis by highlighting some additional courageous actions and strategies that will require the support of moral government actors. Primary in those actions and strategies are those legally binding statutes that:

- institute an equitable pricing mechanism on carbon pollution, and those that ambitiously
- allocate financial resources toward an ambitious national transition to a renewable energy economy

An equitable carbon emissions adjustment mechanism would necessarily be both designed and implemented in a transparent, accountable fashion. The mechanism would not: roll back existing environmental protections, incentivize the offshoring of industrial pollution, or absolve polluters from their obligations to protect vulnerable populations. An ambitious national transition to a renewable energy economy will not be possible without significant taxpayer investment into green infrastructure. Only ten U.S. states currently have carbon pricing mechanisms, and revenues from these cap and trade policies have funded efficiency investments and a clean energy transition at the state level. Even in those ten there is concern that their cap and trade systems do not cover all harmful emissions. Perhaps the clearest example of a successful carbon emissions reduction occurred in Britain, where a 2013 carbon tax prompted electric utilities to switch away from coal and subsequently produce its lowest emissions since the dawn of the Industrial revolution.

As Catholic leaders, we call on our fellow Catholics and inter-faith partners to take the lead in this area through prayer, local energy transition (ex. Catholic Energies program), and congressional advocacy until our earth is sustainably renewed.

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6 https://www.catholicenergies.org/