

**Iowa, the United Nations
And Climate Change**

Drake University

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Bishop Richard E. Pates

The United Nations action on climate change, as it is interpreted and implemented in the State of Iowa, speaks strongly of the commitment of both institutions to the common good and the shared future of our human family. Along with the development, storage and expansion of nuclear weapons world-wide, the issue of climate change has the most to do with the continuation of human life as it is presently experienced on planet earth.

The citizens of the United States responded with unity and significant sacrifice to the threats posed in World War II of being overrun by the dual enemies of Germany and Japan. Resources were severely rationed. There was a valiant effort across the country to produce the necessary war material and provisions to support and take care of our troops. Personal discipline and simplified living became the order of the day. The war effort paid off in success and enabled the continuation of the American experiment.

The question before us is what will it take to generate a similar response in face of an impending climate crisis not only for America but people everywhere? Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* and 96% of contributing scientists state unequivocally, climate change is for real. It is caused by human action. The atmosphere is being poisoned in large measure by the burning of carbon producing fuels – coal, oil and gas creating the greenhouse effect. This generates the development of a ceiling –a phenomenon of trapping heat beneath it. The average temperature is increasing and the deleterious impact of this change is already being experienced in climate, habitat and environmental degradation. This transformation is destructive to the carefully orchestrated interactive rhythm of creation. Credible experts claim that the pattern, already set in motion, could be irreversible by 2075.

The good news in this situation is that climate change is human induced. Human action, therefore, could conceivably reverse this pattern if organized and implemented. It will take a concerted movement similar to that of the World War II U.S. effort and joined by fellow humans across the globe, especially those in the developed countries which are most responsible for the environmental peril of today.

Pope Francis in his landmark encyclical *Laudato Si* identifies the ecological crisis on two fronts. The first is human. Three billion of the seven billion human inhabitants of the world live in serious poverty. Pope Francis attributes this reality to a rupture in relationships whereby personal dignity is compromised in the interest of so-called market forces and development. Social, economic and governmental strategies are in need of overhaul to address this lack of justice.

The United Nation's leadership is worthy of significant applause. In implementing the millennial goals world-wide, poverty has been reduced by 50%. No mean achievement. The new sustainable development goals being adopted by the U.N., in these days, seek to eliminate poverty and hunger world-wide by 2030. The recipients of this relief are not simply a faceless, nameless, anonymous mass. What Pope Francis brings to the table is that each of these receiving individuals as defined by his faith perspective is a person made in the image and likeness of a loving God. Francis holds up and honors the refugee, the imprisoned, the highly disfigured suffering from unfortunate disability, and persons of various sexual orientations among others. Because of who each is, each is worthy of respect and dignity. The Pope embraces them all.

In a document entitled: "Climate Change and the Common Good" the Pontifical Academics of Sciences and Social Sciences states, "Though it is late in the day, the world's governments are recognizing the challenges that we face on a global level. The UN Member States have announced their determination to place Sustainable Development at the center of global cooperation, building a holistic cooperative strategy on the pillars of economic progress, social inclusion and environmental sustainability. This would involve the adoption of new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to help guide global cooperation during the course of future generations. All people of good will should encourage their governments to undertake these

commitments to action. We should also advance our intellectual capacities as well as scientific knowledge, both of the natural and the social sciences, which can be expected to insure the well-being of many future generations in a relatively stable environment.”

The same disconnect so widely prevalent in human ecology is equally present in our relationship with nature. Man regards himself as supreme being, totally in control. Everything is viewed from an anthropocentric perspective and all of nature is open game to be exploited for material benefit. Rather than nature being seen as a system incorporating us humans, it is regarded as raw material to be consumed at will with little reference to sustainability.

Within this radical scenario arise those of vision who have analyzed this problematic reality over scores of year. They have given birth to a generation who are espousing a moral imperative which hopefully stimulates an ever broader momentum to reverse the destructive pattern presently occurring.

The first guiding ethical principle is that Mother Earth and creation are a given and each person is entitled to a reasonable share of its bounty to uphold one’s life and dignity. Thus, the consumption and utilization of the world’s goods should be organized to accomplish such an outcome.

The second moral consideration is that when material products are accumulated in excess by persons to the deprivation of others there arises a failure of human responsibility to share in a manner that is in accord with the cornerstone of our American Declaration of Independence. We are all created equal: It is a failure to implement at the base level of distribution, the world’s goods in tribute to this longstanding value of equality.

In the Christian tradition, there is the maxim which Pope Francis frequently alludes to that if a person is without clothing and another’s closet is full to overflowing, the rich individual wears the clothes belonging to the poor person. The same is applied to the person who regularly scrapes large portions of wasted food into the garbage. That food is the meal of those starving or chronically hungry.

Finally, we share the responsibility of leaving behind an environment and an ecology that will sustain life for future generations that bespeaks a quality certainly achievable with intentional application. Based on the possibility of clean, renewable energy and the reforestation and commitment to maintaining a green landscape the reintroduction of a relatively predictable, and rhythmic climate is possible. Belonging to the realm of essential human rights are unpolluted air and fresh, clean water, certainly possible in the future of our heirs if we pursue a consensus to make them a reality tomorrow by our action of today.

In *Ladato Si* the Pope conveys realistic optimism. “There is still time to mitigate unmanageable climate changes and repair ecosystem damages, provided we reorient our attitude toward nature and, thereby, toward ourselves. Climate change is a global problem the solution of which, will depend on our stepping beyond national affiliations and coming together for the common good. Such transformational changes in attitudes would help foster the necessary institutional reforms and technological innovations for providing the energy sources that have negligible effect on global climate, atmospheric pollution and eco-systems, thus protecting generations yet to be born.”

The pathway to attaining these goals is culminating internationally in Paris this December in the gathering titled: The Twenty-First conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Viewed in some quarters as the outcome of a groundswell of scattered movements over the years of those committed to the preservation of the irreplaceable gift of creation, the summit is scheduled to complete a new universal treaty designed to curb the emission of greenhouse gases worldwide.

The U.N. event comes at a moment that demands commitment to action as we corporately stand on a precipice, falling off of which, would lead to an irreversible downward spiral of the quality of human life and its natural habitat.

Receding back from the grand scale of international action, we recognize the essential participation of us involved on the local level of achieving the transformation that needs to be accomplished.

In Iowa, we are fortunate to be inspired and guided by such organizations as Iowa Interfaith Power and Light. It has been a beacon conveying information about climate change along with an attendant call to action among the religious organizations in the state. This has led to changes such as friendly energy production for a congregation's needs as well as expanding involvement via moral conviction to the broader residential, business and governmental sectors of our society. Its impact on the ground cannot be overestimated.

In our home setting, if conviction moves us individually, a Catholic publication the St. Anthony Messenger identifies where strong motivation will lead us: "Pope Francis is a big-picture thinker, but he also understands that large scale systemic change depends on each one of us. We can all do "little daily actions," that turn away from an individualist – consumer driven mindset. We can support a healthier society and a healthier earth. We can avoid the use of plastic and paper, reduce water consumption, separate refuse, cook only what can be reasonably consumed, show care for other living beings, use public transport or carpooling, plant trees, turn off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous, conscientious and worthy creativity that brings out the best in human beings." (St. Anthony Messenger, October 2015)

An example of independent undertakings here in our state neighborhood, that I like to cite, is that of Justin Doyle, an engineer in Des Moines who is Christian. He is very practical and very much oriented toward healthy economic development. He transforms older buildings by installing solar energy that is sustainable and highly economical. He has reduced outright energy costs in a mid-size industrial office building to a total of about \$16.00 a month.

As I drive along the southwest portion of Interstate 80 in the Diocese of Des Moines, certainly a garden spot, I admire the extensive development of wind energy. Mid-American energy anticipates that 57% of its source of power will come from "clean, renewable" sources. This

places Iowa, whose citizens we like to consider “enlightened,” at the very top of the states employing such resources. They are both efficient, economically positive and have the long-term benefit of serving the common good and future generations.

When Pope John Paul II visited Living History Farms and the State of Iowa on October 4, 1979, he upheld the dignity of farmers, “Farmers be proud” he boomed. What is so impressive are the countless farmers I encounter who are determined to leave the fertile soil, which is among the world’s best, in better condition than they inherited it. It is important to encourage them to keep moving in ways of positive conservation particularly in the preservation of water quality absolutely essential for a healthy lifestyle now and into the future.

We, in Iowa, host the beginning of the four year cycle to elect the U.S. President. It is a particularly valuable opportunity to highlight and talk up with these candidates, in small settings, the importance that we attach to a revolution in the form of energy production. This holds a grave responsibility for us in the United States. Our country’s industrial and domestic utilization production are responsible for a significant disproportionate percentage of the greenhouse gases that are creating the climate problems. In the can-do American spirit, we can change for the benefit of all.

As we move forward in different dimensions of ecological reform, we need constantly to be aware that “humanity’s relationship with nature needs to be undertaken by cooperative, collective action at all levels – local, regional and global.” (Climate Change & Common Good)

Returning to the original proposition, that overcoming the climate crisis of human ecology and natural ecology, requires committed movement equivalent to that of the World War II effort which transpired in the United States, there is a role for all of us to exercise in this proposed tsunami of international transformation. United in our investment in the common good, with unflagging conviction and renewable personal energy, we can make a difference.

The components of our efforts are captured in the “Climate Change and the Common Good” statement of The Pontifical Academics of Sciences and Social Sciences:

“Over and above institutional reforms, policy changes and technological innovations for affordable access to renewable energy sources, there is a fundamental need to reorient our attitude toward nature and, thereby, toward ourselves.”

As a churchman and in the spirit of companions on a faith journey, I note, “Finding ways to develop a sustainable relationship with nature requires not only the engagement of scientists, political leaders, educators and civil societies, but will succeed only if it is based on a moral revolution that religious institutions are in a special position to promote.”