

DISCIPLESHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY—INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Discussion of “Reflections on the Energy Crisis,” A Statement by the Committee on Social Development and World Peace, United States Catholic Conference, 1981
- Convener: Erin Lothes, College of St. Elizabeth, New Jersey
- Moderator: Erin Lothes, College of St. Elizabeth, New Jersey

The Interest Group on Discipleship and Sustainability held its second meeting on June 8, 2014, to discuss “Reflections on the Energy Crisis, A Statement by the Committee on Social Development and World Peace, United States Catholic Conference, 1981.” This letter represents an important discussion of energy ethics by the U.S. Bishops in the context of the energy crisis, energy security, foreign policy, peak oil, and the energy needs of the poor when climate change was still a nascent concern. Given the drastically increased urgency of climate change, with present and future impacts upon the wellbeing of global society, energy ethics needs to be reconsidered while drawing on the wisdom of the Catholic tradition. Such is the focus of our group.

The discussion centered upon nine commentaries made available in advance of the convention via a link from the CTSA home page (<http://www.ctsa-online.org>) that was noted in our session description to encourage participation by all members of the CTSA. The session was well attended by 15 persons in addition to the commentary authors. (Two authors who were unable to travel to San Diego participated by phone conferencing.) Each author addressed a theme within the Bishops’ letter and provided a commentary that expressed the contemporary context and offered new scholarship.

The authors and the sections they addressed are as follows: Meghan Clark, St. John’s University, “Striving for a More Just Society”; David Cloutier, Mount St. Mary’s University, “Accepting Limitation in a Christian Spirit”; Christine Firer Hinze, Fordham University, “Energy Distribution and Control: The Problem of Systemic Evil”; Erin Lothes, College of Saint Elizabeth, “Sources of Energy: Renewable Energy;” Rich Miller, Creighton University, “Sources of Energy: Coal and Oil”; Christiana Z. Peppard, Fordham University, “Making The Transition—Sources of Energy: natural gas”; Nancy Rourke, Canisius College, “The Moral Dimensions of Energy Policy: Moral Principles”; Jame Schaefer, Marquette University, “Sources of Energy: Nuclear Energy”; and Matthew Shadle, Marymount University, “Foreign Policy.” Dan DiLeo represented the Catholic Climate Coalition. Within the discussion, attendees John Pawlikowski, an original consultant to the Bishops, shared his perspective, and Elaine Padilla offered comments related to the impacts and mitigation efforts of the global South.

The discussion sought first to identify the critical principles, values, concepts, vocabulary, and contexts that are rooted in Catholic theology as expressed by the Bishops, and needed in a new way today for an emerging framework for Catholic energy ethics. Several core principles were repeatedly emphasized—subsidiarity, solidarity, social sin, the option for the poor, protecting human life and dignity, particularly for environmental refugees, and the moral nature of energy choices, while noting their increasing attention to ecology since 1981.

A second aim was to brainstorm steps toward co-authoring a white paper statement, including effective formats and publication venues. Models of religiously-based environmental analyses mentioned included the “Toxic Wastes and Race” Report, key articles in *America* magazine, and a 2011 issue of *Zygon* dedicated to religious energy ethics. We discussed the effectiveness of articulating values versus discussing specific policies, and tones appropriate for the public square, for transformative pedagogy, and for ministry.

We also discussed the importance of inviting interdisciplinary comment given the necessity of integrating the expertise of economists, scientists, policy thinkers, etc. Similarly, through a 2015 Society of Christian Ethics panel some of us will invite interfaith comment.

The necessity and challenge of speaking about climate change as a moral issue was discussed at length. We discussed how to frame a narrative that emphasizes the urgent crisis of irreversible impacts on the earth’s ecosystems, which constitute climate change as a moral imperative, while conveying that imperative in effective, pastoral and pedagogical language. We also discussed how to urge large-scale systemic change in addition to lifestyle changes, engaging the Catholic teaching on subsidiarity. Honesty and disclosure emerged as key values, calling for denouncing denial, insisting on the clear disclosure of risks, acknowledging the imbalanced power of energy companies (i.e., political manipulation and lobbying that eviscerates full public participation), and the need for full accounting of external and social costs. Positively, the power of investment and policy to create new options was noted.

The spiritual dimension of responding to climate change was acknowledged, recognizing our membership in the one family of creation, our status as fellow creatures, and the dignity and needs of all. This unity which grounds solidarity sparked a discussion of inequality and overconsumption. Particular international issues were noted, including the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals, environmental refugees, and the upcoming UN Climate Summit. We discussed how to address lifestyle change, identify the sin of luxury, define “sufficiency,” and clarify guidelines for just energy use that elicit both an urgent and loving response and highlight the interconnected nature of morality in a globalized age.

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