

DISCIPLESHIP AND SUSTAINABILITY—INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Discussion of “Catholic Moral Traditions and Energy Ethics for the Twenty-first Century,” reflecting on a 1981 Bishops’ Statement on Energy
- Convener: Erin Lothes, College of St. Elizabeth
- Moderator: Erin Lothes, College of St. Elizabeth
- Respondents: Dawn Nothwehr, O.F.M., Chicago Theological Union
Daniel Finn, St. John’s University

The Interest Group on Discipleship and Sustainability held its third and culminating meeting on June 13, 2015, to discuss “Catholic Moral Traditions and Energy Ethics for the Twenty-first Century,” the just-published, peer-reviewed, co-authored article produced by members of the Interest Group. “Reflections on the Energy Crisis: A Statement by the Committee on Social Development and World Peace, United States Catholic Conference, 1981.” This article was published online in the *Journal of Moral Theology* in advance of its print publication in June 2016, in order to be available before the release of Pope Francis’s encyclical on the environment.

Erin Lothes opened the session by describing the two aims of the Interest Group:

- (1) to examine current energy realities in light of enduring principles of Catholic social teaching, especially as articulated within the framework of the 1981 U.S. Bishops’ Statement on Energy, and provide an academic paper for the scholarly literature; and
- (2) to advance conversation regarding energy decisions by providing more accessible formats—one intended for the Catholic Church and another for secular policy consideration.

To produce these three documents, ten authors commented on sections of the Bishops’ 1981 Statement that were presented in last year’s session, Erin Lothes Biviano submitted each to multiple reviewers whose comments were resent to the authors, and the revised commentaries were collected in September 2014. Christiana Peppard, Elaine Padilla, and David Cloutier, and Jame Schaefer volunteered to serve as primary authors under Erin’s leadership to synthesize the research into a single scholarly document. It was submitted to the *Journal of Moral Theology* and accepted for online publication in June 2015 and print publication in 2016. Two summaries were subsequently prepared and made available online at “CatholicEnergyEthics21C.”

The session proceeded to comments by Dawn Nothwehr and Daniel Finn. Dawn raised the importance of engaging the human rights tradition, and she identified three themes with rich references to papal encyclicals and Vatican II documents that engaged the human rights tradition. –She suggested that human rights offered ways to secure rights to future generations, provided principles to evaluate energy policy, and enabled ways to build global political coalitions. –She noted how environmental protections became increasingly integrated in human rights documents.

Dan Finn expressed his appreciation for the accomplishment of a co-authored paper treating this topic comprehensively, and the centrality of the Bishops’ moral principles. He raised helpful points about terminology to consider in further discussion, including technological “optimism” rather than “determinism” and the use of “transparency and participation” to mean the process of discussion, not necessarily

Interest Group: Discipleship and Sustainability

the inclusion or sharing of data. He asked for more nuanced discussion of the moral status of profit, noting that self-interest is legitimate but should not be the purpose of a corporation. He also discussed the ways a cap-and-trade policy can address efficiency in transitioning to lower-carbon systems, and suggested public transit merited more attention. He appreciated the contextualizing of the cost of shifting globally to renewable energy. He helpfully offered that if the \$800 billion clean investment gap is 1% of global GDP, then 1% of an average American household's income (at \$54,000) would be roughly \$500, or \$42 a month—less than most pay for their cell phone bill. Finally, he commented on the impact of price shifts in fossil fuels due to the recent surge in inexpensive natural gas production, and how that has changed the game for renewables as well.

Attention turned to brief responses to Dan and Dawn by the four primary authors of the article in the *Journal of Moral Theology*. They expressed their gratitude to the commentators and appreciation for Erin's leadership in this project.

During the discussion that followed, John Pawlikowski and Tobias Winright underscored the value of interfaith discussion of energy ethics exemplified by the energy ethics panel at the 2015 Society of Christian Ethics-meeting in which Erin and Christiana participated. Tresia Hinga encouraged considering biofuels and energy poverty. Jame expressed concerns about language used, including the "flourishing" of all life, not only human- a point affirmed by Dawn and other discussants as essential and complementary (and most likely to be emphasized by Pope Francis).

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