

CHERNOBYL AND THE ENVIRONMENT: ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

*Address at Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral, Melbourne,
on the 20th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, 30 April 2006*

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Heads of churches, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, colleagues and friends,

We gather this evening grieving for the effects of the Chernobyl disaster and with minds deeply troubled because of its grave implications for the rest of the world. Many of you know the details of the nuclear accident very well, and perhaps some of your families or friends have been directly affected. Undoubtedly also, many of you have been involved with relief and aid efforts which are still much needed.

On the night of 25-26 April 1986, the reactor exploded, according to a conservative estimate releasing a hundred times more radiation than the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Shifting winds carried the radioactivity not just over Ukraine, Belarus and parts of Russia, but over much of Europe, especially Poland and Sweden, and even England and the United States.

For ten days the reactor burnt. The greatest fear was that if the nuclear fuel reached 2900 degrees centigrade, it would burn through the concrete foundations into the water table below, causing an immensely greater explosion that would destroy the other three reactors and spread nuclear contamination far more widely over Europe.

Those first on the scene - technicians, firemen and soldiers – were exposed to deadly radiation in a frantic effort to try to put out the fire. The world owes them a great debt of gratitude. Many of them would have known of the threat to their lives. They helped limit what could have been a far greater tragedy.

The number of people who died from the accident at Chernobyl is surprisingly small, one recent study listing only 57 deaths as a direct result. But exposure to radiation is slow acting. A spokesman for the World Health Organisation estimated the likely number of excess deaths in the worst affected areas will rise to about 4000, with a further 5000 dying in less contaminated areas. Other groups contest these figures strongly, claiming a much higher death toll. There has certainly been a great increase in non-malignant disease and psychological distress.

The economic and social effects have also been extremely significant. Nearly 8000 square kms of arable land was knocked out of use, and 7000 square kms of forest. About 350,000 people in the worst affected areas had to be resettled, and 70 entire villages had to be abandoned and buried. Nevertheless, 5.5 million people still live in less contaminated areas. The economic costs of the disaster for Ukraine alone are estimated at US\$200 billion by 2015, more than five times its 2001 national income. The government of Ukraine pays US\$1 billion a year in compensation and pensions to people affected by Chernobyl.

The disaster demonstrated to the rest of the world some frightful effects of nuclear contamination. Chernobyl is one of the truly ghastly ‘signs of the times’. As Pope John Paul II said: ‘How can one prevent disasters that destroy the environment and threaten all forms of life?’

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Some moral principles to guide efforts to reduce global warming

The Chernobyl incident has become more significant currently because of the new debate about nuclear energy as a way of reducing global warming. You would be aware that there is a concerted campaign to expand our mining and sales of uranium, and perhaps even to build nuclear energy plants in Australia.

There is now no doubt that global warming is looming as an extremely serious threat to our human wellbeing. This is not science fiction unfortunately. Unless global warming can be greatly reduced, we are told sea levels will rise, weather patterns will become more extreme, and temperatures will rise sharply, disrupting world food supplies, precipitating political disorder or conflict over scarce resources, and perhaps even causing population collapse in various parts of the world. The prospects are alarming in the extreme.

How can we resolve these various problems competing for our attention? As believers, we recognise that this beautiful planet we live on is an astonishing gift from the Creator, to be revered always, to sustain not just our lives and wellbeing, but that of all peoples across the generations. Hence we have a sacred duty to care for the planet, and a responsibility to strive that the goods of the earth are used to meet the needs of all. Traditionally we have talked of this duty of care as one of stewardship.

In light of the looming environmental crisis, I would like to highlight some key moral principles to guide our decision-making at this time. The first is that of the **common good**. This insists that the earth exists to benefit all people, not just some fortunate individuals or peoples. But it is not self-evident how to bring about this common good. We must use our gifts of intelligence and initiative to develop practical means to ensure that everybody has enough resources to live a decent life. The common good is not meant as an abstract concept, but as the way we arrange our world to produce the best outcome for every person, not just for a majority.

The second principle is that of **solidarity**, meaning a firm commitment on our part to sustaining the common good, with all the organisational effort and social structures needed. Solidarity also means that we be prepared to make sacrifices if need be so that others can live more humane lives.

The global warming crisis has been overwhelmingly caused by the industrialised nations, but by a bitter irony the poorest countries will likely pay an inordinate price. Even a modest rise in sea levels will flood some island states and displace many millions of people, like those living in the deltas of Egypt and Bangladesh. Solidarity demands striving for justice and social equity in helping others to survive the adverse effects of global warming.

A third principle is that of the so-called '**option for the poor**'. As believers, we understand that God has a special concern for the poor or disadvantaged, and expects us to share that concern. Religious groups have referred to this as an 'option for the poor'. It is a recent phrase for a traditional emphasis that has long been embodied in the charitable and social works in Australia and overseas.

A marvellous contemporary expression of this is the current effort to reduce hunger and poverty in the poorest countries through the UN Millennium Development Goals. People of all religions and of none can recognise in these Goals this unique moment in history, when together we can help lift millions of people out of the most degrading hunger and poverty. Religious groups have been at the forefront of those mobilising public opinion to support the Millennium Development Goals, though our federal government has barely begun to move with the needed urgency on these issues of aid and development. But global warming could undermine progress in eliminating global poverty, and the challenge will be to tackle both global poverty and the problems of greenhouse gases.

Finally, we must learn again to live with more **moderation and restraint** in our use of material resources. We simply cannot continue to be so profligate in our use of the fossil fuels causing global warming. We need to consider how coming generations will survive if our lifestyle gravely damages the climate. Unless we make major changes very quickly, future generations may well curse us for being so blind and selfish. They may well see our generation as having plundered the earth, with contempt for others and for later generations. Religious groups need again to find their traditional voice in urging restraint and responsibility in the use of material goods.

Is nuclear energy the answer?

There can now be no reasonable doubt that we face an unprecedented environmental crisis with global warming, and it has become absolutely critical that we reduce carbon gas emissions. Nuclear energy is seen as a quick answer to this problem. France already uses nuclear power to produce 80% of its electricity.

Worldwide in 2005 there were 441 nuclear power stations in 31 countries. Fully 291 have been operating for more than 20 years, with 16 of the same type as Chernobyl. A further 25 reactors are under construction. In Ukraine itself, a moratorium on new nuclear plants was lifted in 1992 because of its acute shortage of energy.

But consider this: if nuclear power plants had dotted Europe before the Second World War, they would have been prime military targets. If they had been destroyed, there would have been many disasters like Chernobyl, and worse, all over Europe. These would have rendered huge areas uninhabitable for thousands of years. Can we be confident that we will never have another war in countries with nuclear power plants, not just in Europe, but in Central Asia, China, India, the Middle East or North Africa?

Furthermore, we are still left with the dilemmas about

- the danger of *accidents* like Chernobyl,
- the increasingly serious *risk from terrorist attacks*,
- the threat of uranium fuel finding its *way into nuclear weapons* in rogue states,
- and the *safe disposal of wastes* that will remain dangerous for tens of thousands of years. The problem of waste disposal has not been solved.

Moreover, despite claims to the contrary, nuclear energy is not cheap, and reactors need massive support from taxpayers, including subsidies, to cover the cost of clean-ups and to guarantee insurance compensation payments beyond a certain amount. The costs of building reactors and mining ore are also significant contributors to greenhouse gases.

The problems are complex, but we should clearly recognise that nuclear energy offers no quick or easy answers to global warming, and poses enormous risks.

Uranium mining

The Chernobyl tragedy poses some specific questions for us in Australia about extending our uranium exports. The moral question is one of cooperation in programs that may lead to calamitous outcomes. We cannot just disclaim responsibility for how our uranium might be used. How does one decide whether safeguards are adequate or not? Australia has recently renewed major sales of uranium to China, a country under tight communist control. In addition, our government has been sounding out public opinion on whether to sell uranium to India, a country that has not signed the nuclear proliferation treaty and has acquired nuclear weapons. How will selling our uranium to India not further damage the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty?

Australia has about 40 per cent of the world's known supply of uranium, and mining companies understandably want to sell as much as they can. But is it in the national interest to make some millions of dollars of profits at the risk of such great and possibly irreversible damage to human wellbeing and the environment?

The churches and social conscience

It is difficult to underestimate how critical are these decisions about nuclear power and weapons. If we make the wrong decisions, we will face truly apocalyptic scenarios, jeopardising the survival of perhaps millions of people

Such decisions are not just technical, but profoundly moral. The Christian churches and other religious traditions have a special role to play in these decision-making processes. Religious groups have no monopoly on the social conscience of a nation of course, but certainly have an important role to play in helping form this conscience.

Religious leaders are understandably reluctant to engage in debate about such difficult and controversial issues as nuclear power and arms proliferation. Yet such great matters affecting the survival of so many people cannot be ignored. This does not mean that religious leaders can provide instant or easy answers to such complex matters, but they must be part of the conversation about the moral issues at the heart of these dilemmas; they can help provide platforms for honest and informed debate, and be prepared if necessary to challenge powerful special interests.

As the Cardinal of Los Angeles, Roger Mahoney, said recently of the Catholic Church at least, many US church leaders have been silent in the face of grave social issues, because of the effects of the sexual abuse crisis. He of course acknowledged how the sexual abuse crisis had gravely damaged the church's credibility, but insisted that the churches still have a duty to speak on critical social issues, and must not allow themselves to be silent.

On this anniversary of Chernobyl, we remember those who have suffered and continue to suffer from its effects, and we pray earnestly that we will learn the lessons well. Instead of looking to nuclear energy, we should be developing renewable energy sources, in conjunction with deep changes in our lifestyles. The fires of Chernobyl flared like a terrible beacon warning us to exercise extreme caution lest its fate be ours.