

Global warming threat or oppor

Bruce Duncan

Scarcely a week goes by without new and more dire warnings about the consequences of global warming and climate change. The May CSIRO report, *Climate Change in Victoria: a Summary*, spells out how serious and widespread will be the effects of rising temperatures here. Only the most obtuse commentators can be in any doubt about the overwhelming scientific consensus that the human race is facing one of its gravest crises ever.

Though scientists debate the range of likely outcomes unless carbon emissions are rapidly and sharply reduced, senior scientific bodies are warning of temperature increases of 4-5 degrees Celsius. Sea levels could rise by as much as 20 feet if large sections of ice over Greenland or Antarctica melted. Such events would inundate not just vulnerable island groups, but also major river deltas in the Nile, Ganges, Yellow River and elsewhere, displacing hundreds of millions of people and undermining critical areas of food production. The flood of climate refugees would be altogether unprecedented and politically destabilising.

To make matters even more difficult, all this will be occurring when world population will increase nearly 50 percent to about 9 billion before levelling out around 2050. Development economists have been quietly confident that the world could not only feed these extra millions, but also significantly increase their standard of living. However the threat of global warming has suddenly placed much of this planning in jeopardy.

To cause further anguish, the urgent measures needed to counteract greenhouse emissions could divert resources and the political will from the global effort to lift living standards for the world's poorest people. Australia was among 189 nations in 2000 that committed themselves to support the UN Millennium Development Goals to reduce by half the extent of hunger and the grossest poverty by 2015, and hopefully to eliminate hunger and the severest poverty entirely by 2025.

In practice, many rich countries, including Australia, have fallen well behind in their commitments to achieve these goals, even though their contributions would be relatively quite modest. Now the extensive problems associated with global warming could divert attention from this historic opportunity to banish hunger

everywhere in the world. The poorest people would be forced to pay a savage price for the greenhouse profligacy of the industrial countries.

No doubt much of the world would adjust, shift or rebuild coastal cities, develop new agricultural methods etc. But consider what global warming will mean for Australia. Even a rise in sea levels of only a few feet would have significant effects on our capital and coastal cities.

Perhaps more significantly, rising temperatures and drought would force much of our farm land to be retired, as would happen across much of Africa and elsewhere. The more extreme heat would make much of Australia's inland especially even more torrid for both humans and animals.

Tropical diseases like malaria will spread south, and weather patterns would become more extreme and damaging. Hurricanes would move down the east coast of Australian, meaning that all buildings would have to be redesigned to withstand the extreme weather. How would Victorians protect our wonderful forests from frequent and more destructive bushfires, destroying much of our extraordinary flora and wildlife and threatening our water catchments?

Decisions that we take now, or fail to take, could have drastic and lasting consequences for future generations. It is a moment of the most acute peril, calling for honest recognition of the problem, courage in addressing it, and real insight and wisdom in finding ways to develop a sustainable future.

The Church's social thinking has much to offer us here, though it is often unknown. Not only does it stress the dignity of every human person, it demands that resources be distributed justly, so that everyone has the chance of a humane and fulfilling life. Against the current rampant

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consumerism, we must recover deeper respect for the traditional Christian virtues of moderation in life styles, and must be willing to share goods and services so others may have the basic goods of life and family.

Speaking to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in early May, Pope Benedict stressed that at the heart of the Church's social teaching is 'the principle of the universal destination of all the goods of creation': resources must be distributed to ensure that all human beings have enough to live a decent life.

He recognised that the campaign against global poverty must not be sacrificed to efforts to curtail global warming. He singled out the challenge of preserving the environment while at the same time promoting sustainable development. Moreover, he stressed 'Particular attention must be paid to the fact that the poorest countries are likely to pay the heaviest price for ecological deterioration'.

Benedict also appealed to the German Chancellor Merkel to put reducing global poverty at the centre of the G-8 Summit in June 2007. On 23 April he made an urgent call for 'the rapid, total and unconditional cancellation' of the external debt of the impoverished countries, as a 'grave and unconditional responsibility'.

Indicative of Vatican views, its representative at the UN, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, on 10 May testified to the UN Commission on Sustainable Development that the scientific evidence of human responsibility for global warming had become 'ever more unimpeachable', as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change attested. The ethical, economic, social and political consequences would be profound, particularly affecting 'the poorest and weakest who, even if they are among the least responsible for global warming, are the most vulnerable

because they have limited resources or live in areas at greater risk.'

Migliore continued that the economic growth model needed to change, 'from one of heedless pursuit of economic growth in the name of development, toward a model which heeds the consequences of its actions', and is mindful both of the poorest people and of future generations.

Yet Migliore was hopeful that the world can provide more resources to those in urgent material need while still reducing energy consumption and greenhouse gases. But he warned that richer nations must learn to moderate their consumption and adopt more modest and responsible lifestyles. He also called for more appropriate technologies, including for poorer countries, and major changes in production, construction, transport, businesses and other institutions.

He said that 'unprecedented ecological changes are already taking place' with unforeseen consequences. 'Remedies are not beyond our ingenuity, but we should be careful not to choose a path that will make things worse, especially for the poor. We cannot simply uninvent the modern world, but there is still time to use technology and education to promote universally sustainable development before it is too late.'

The threat of global warming may just work to our advantage, but only if we see it as an opportunity to rework our systems of production and economics to ensure more equitable and sustainable outcomes. **m**

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'God's love is offered to everyone, hence the Church's charity is also universal in scope, and so it has to include a commitment to social justice... her mission is to promote the integral development of the human person.'

For this reason, the great challenges facing the world at the present time, such as globalization, human rights abuses, unjust social structures, cannot be confronted and overcome unless attention is focused on the deepest needs of the human person: the promotion of human dignity, well-being and, in the final analysis, eternal salvation.'

POPE BENEDICT XVI

Address to the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, 13 May 2007