



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development  
Office of Domestic Social Development

**GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE**  
January 2016

*“Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and for the distribution of goods. It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day.”*

--Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, June 18 2015

**BACKGROUND**

In his wide-ranging encyclical on human and natural ecology, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis calls on and challenges all people to protect creation and our common home. The Pope makes clear that our care for one another and our care for the earth are intimately bound together. Climate change is one of the principal challenges facing society and the global community. The effects of climate change are borne by the most vulnerable people, whether at home or around the world. The Catholic Church brings a distinct perspective to the debate about climate change by lifting up the moral dimensions of this issue and the needs of the most vulnerable among us. As Catholics our faith calls us to care for *all* of God’s creation, especially the ‘least of these’ (Mt 25:40).

Greenhouse gases are a major contributor to climate change. Many experts have determined that current and projected concentrations of greenhouse gases endanger public health and the welfare of future generations. Power plants are the largest stationary source of carbon pollution in the United States: about one third of all greenhouse gas pollution in the U.S. comes from the generation of electricity by power plants.

On August 3, the EPA, as directed by the president, finalized the first national standards to reduce carbon pollution from currently operating power plants. These standards create a federal-state partnership, with the EPA setting state goals for reducing carbon dioxide emissions and states deciding how best to meet these goals. Nationwide, by 2030, these standards will reduce carbon dioxide emissions from the power sector by 32 percent.

In the United States, power plants have often been located near low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. Air pollution from these plants contributes to health problems, especially in the young and the elderly. These standards would significantly reduce carbon pollution from power plants; they would also reduce particle pollution, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxides, which have been linked to important human and environmental health problems.

Around the world, these effects are even more severe. Catholic Relief Services is helping the most vulnerable people respond to increasing floods, droughts, food and water insecurity, and conflict over declining resources. All these are making the lives of the world’s poorest people even more precarious. These standards are a vital first step to protecting the world’s most vulnerable people and allow the United States to exercise critical leadership necessary for achieving and implementing a global agreement.

Pope Francis has long raised the moral imperative to reach an agreement at the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris that addresses the potentially catastrophic consequences of climate change and protects poor and vulnerable peoples and nations. In his Sunday, December 13 Angelus address, Pope Francis commended world leaders for reaching a historic agreement at the Paris climate talks, urging that its “implementation will require a concerted commitment and generous dedication by all”, and reiterating that it must give “special attention to the most vulnerable populations.”

## USCCB POSITION

The U.S. bishops promote prudent action predicated on justice to address the growing impact of global climate change. As the bishops note in *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, “Action to mitigate global climate change must be built upon a foundation of social and economic justice.”

National standards to reduce carbon pollution from power plants represent an important opportunity to protect the health and welfare of all people, especially children, the elderly and poor and vulnerable communities. In [testimony](#) offered on November 18, 2015 at an EPA public hearing, Archbishop Thomas Wenski and Bishop Oscar Cantú, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace, respectively, expressed support for a national standard to reduce carbon pollution and offered moral principles to guide the EPA and states as they take steps to reduce carbon pollution. These principles include: care for creation, promotion of the common good, respect for the human person, and a priority for those who are poor and vulnerable. In particular, the bishops urged that as these standards are implemented, workers negatively impacted should be assisted, and any increased utility costs should be distributed fairly, without undue burden on the poor. The bishops also recognized the important flexibility given to states in determining how best to meet the emissions goals set by the EPA.

The bishops also support the international Green Climate Fund that will help developing nations shift towards a low-emission and climate resilient development, and help them adapt to the impacts of climate change. As Pope Francis wrote: Poor developing nations “require the help of countries which have experienced great growth at the cost of the ongoing pollution of the planet” (172).

The EPA carbon standards and U.S. support for the Green Climate Fund demonstrate critical U.S. leadership and commitment that were essential to securing a successful outcome at the UN Climate Change negotiations in Paris and will be critical for ensuring its effective implementation.

## ACTION

Multiple efforts are anticipated in Congress to block the EPA from developing and implementing carbon pollution standards. As Archbishop Wenski urged in his [June 24 letter](#) to Congress, ask government leaders to:

- “[O]ppose legislation and appropriations riders designed to reverse efforts to implement a national standard to reduce carbon pollution from existing power plants.”

The United States has a moral responsibility to lead the world’s efforts to ensure that people in developing countries can build a path toward sustainable development, protecting themselves from climate change (adaptation) and adopting alternative sources of clean energy (mitigation) while continuing to grow their economies and reduce poverty:

- Provide new U.S. funding for the Green Climate Fund that will help poor and vulnerable people in developing countries to adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

## RESOURCES

- USCCB Environmental Justice Program Page: <http://www.usccb.org/environment>
- *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good* at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/global-climate-change-a-plea-for-dialogue-prudence-and-the-common-good.cfm>
- Catholic Climate Covenant at: <http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/>

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