

Climate Change, Asian Impacts and Response**II FABC CLIMATE CHANGE SEMINAR
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FABC Central Secretariat****CONTENTS**

- I. Introduction**
- II. The Science**
- III. Our Experience in Asia and the Pacific**
- IV. How It All Happens**
- V. The Church's Response**
- VI. Conclusion**
- VII. Participants**

I. INTRODUCTION

We, the presidents of Bishops' Conferences of Asia and Officers of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Chairmen of Justice, Peace and Development Commissions and Caritas Offices of eighteen countries of Asia and other participants from countries such as Belgium, Germany, Papua New Guinea, Samoa and Malta came together at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand for the 23-24 October 2013 seminar on climate change. This is the second of two such seminars on climate change which were facilitated by the generous initiative and support of Misereor, Germany and Porticus Asia.

Our Seminar began with an introduction and welcome address by His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay and the President of the FABC in which he urged everyone to be seized of the seriousness of global warming. Climate change, he said, is an unprecedented and unparalleled threat to humanity. It is a continuous onslaught causing massive loss of life and destruction with immense consequences for humanity and the rest of creation. A recent cyclone in India caused much havoc unlike its predecessors and wreaked extensive damage. Agriculture and rural development are and will be most affected with the prospect of flood and droughts, leading to repeated crop failures impacting food security, housing and livelihood and livestock. The Church is very concerned about this reality. That is why Pope Francis in his very first homily at the inaugural Mass spoke about the duty of all to protect creation. Similarly his Predecessor, Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI appealed to all to 'respect the internal laws of creation' and obey them, and emphasized the urgency of 'obedience to the voice of the earth.' The Cardinal called local churches in Asia to engage with the governments and NGOs, political leaders and movements in order to avert the dangers of climate change, underlining that it is our responsibility to convey, with a clear and confident voice, the message of the gospel - of caring for each other and of caring for creation.

II. THE SCIENCE

Climate scientists awakened us to the consequences of climate change that are already taking place and continue to take place on our planet and helped us to discern the impending effects of climate change in Asia and to affirm more clearly our obligation to engage in effective action to prevent global warming from exceeding +1.5°C. The scientific data presented to us on the first day of the seminar alerted us to the most pressing challenge facing humanity: global warming, also known as climate change. This consists in the increase of several human-induced Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, especially carbon dioxide

(CO₂) into the atmosphere. This increase severely impacts the planetary ecosystem. The work of more than 2,500 scientists comprising the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) demonstrates that the temperature on our planet is steadily increasing over pre-industrial levels which will have a lasting impact on present and future generations. According to the Panel's most recent findings, issued as the Report of Working Group I of IPCC's Fifth Assessment Report climate change is due overwhelmingly to human activities, but can be mitigated by GHG emission reductions.

III. OUR EXPERIENCE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

The experience of people in various Asian countries shared during the seminar confirmed our conviction about the alarming threat facing our region. On the one hand, Asia has had to face during the past decade more devastating floods, typhoons, hurricanes, cyclones and landslides than in previous decades. On the other, Asia also experiences water shortages due to reduced rainfall. Saline intrusion due to sea level rise affects the quality of water contained in coastal aquifers. All these events result in the destruction of human lives, livelihoods, natural resources and livestock.

The experience of the small island states whose populations may well become climate refugees is another indicator of the worst case scenarios that may lie ahead of us. These islanders are the most affected by sea level rise although they have contributed the least to greenhouse gas emissions. Such events are happening on regional and global levels with unprecedented frequency. On a global level, there are other visible indicators of climate change such as melting glaciers and polar ice sheets, desertification, changing weather patterns and rising sea levels. All this is mainly due to the increase in the average temperature of the planet. It is of utmost importance that we underscore the human responsibility for human-made changes in the climate.

Moreover the underlying role of our development policies, economic priorities and related projects needs to be highlighted.

IV. HOW IT ALL HAPPENS

In this context we realize that rapid industrialization of the economy based on a materialistic model of capitalistic growth as well as the development of industrial agriculture have left their emissions-related mark on our climate. The growth model and the resulting lifestyle of the high and middle income sectors of our society in Asia have exacerbated this crisis. Asian societies for centuries were marked by family ties, simplicity and frugality of lifestyle as well as a basic communion with nature. Joining with every believer in God, we affirm that climate change is a moral, ethical and religious issue.

Scientists also made us aware that any delay in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and other practices such as deforestation can lead us to irreversible consequences. We also recognize that the issue of climate change is a matter of intergenerational justice. To hand over a planet that is unlivable to the next generation is an injustice. The cry of the next generation will, we believe, resound in the ears of our God who 'sees and hears' the cry of his people (Exodus 3:7-9).

In seeking remedial measures needed to slow down the pace of climate change, the principle of equity among nations and within nations must be fully respected.

V. THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

As Church we are challenged by this grave situation since climate change is an ethical, moral and religious issue. The Church in Asia, although representing a small percentage (3 per cent) of the total population, is not deterred from issuing a clarion call. We cannot but raise our voice on behalf of those people most impacted by climate change. Our voice must be

matched by choices both at personal level as Christians as well as at ecclesial level as communities.

In order to respond as Church we need to identify certain priorities:

- ❖ A part of our prophetic task is to promote critical reflection among all Christian communities on the development policies and programmes of governments that adversely affect the poor. We must promote a new consciousness that the climate change issue is both a justice issue and a religious issue.
- ❖ We must help people recognize that the result of our actions is against God's commandment not to steal from future generations.
- ❖ We should promote models such as the Mekong Adaptation and Resilience to Climate Change project, to bring about co-operation between science and community-led action to respond to climate change. Another focus on potential climate change refugees and migrants may well present a pressing future need.
- ❖ The need of the hour is to live an eco-spirituality in tune with the Word of God, a spirituality marked by action on behalf of the exploited poor and the exploited nature.
- ❖ We must advocate and promote policies and programmes of renewable energy from solar power, water, biomass and wind.
- ❖ The Church should not only prophetically oppose and expose deforestation policies. It should undertake activities such as tree planting in as large a measure as possible.
- ❖ The outreach of the Church to civil society should aim at awakening public opinion to the disastrous consequences of climate change in order to encourage sustainable lifestyles and to promote a paradigm of

focussing on 'being' rather than merely on 'having' coincident with long-established Asian cultural values and sensitivities.

- ❖ The FABC should prepare materials and practical guidance on environmental issues for use by national conferences and dioceses of Asia. We also urge conferences of Bishops to establish climate change desks to facilitate collaboration with the wider Asian communities.
- ❖ In advocating a change in national and local policies and programmes, the Church must focus on the concerns of the most vulnerable: the indigenous and the poor of Asia.
- ❖ Since climate change is an ethical and religious issue, the Church must work together with peoples of all faiths.
- ❖ We strongly urge that a special "season for the integrity of creation" starting on the 1st September and ending with the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi on 4th October be observed in our dioceses in Asia. This will not only awaken people to their responsibility for, and stewardship of, creation but also include prayers and initiatives at parish and diocesan levels for the same purpose.

VI. CONCLUSION

We thank all those who have helped us become aware of the challenge of climate change, sharpen our vision and discern God's plan. We thank all the scientists, organizations and movements who commit themselves to the future of humanity and devote themselves to the cause of the protection of creation. Our hope is that God who constantly renews the face of the earth will energize humanity, the church and all religions to wholeheartedly pursue the path of safeguarding the integrity of creation.

In concluding this reflection we take inspiration from Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis who have articulated the Church's concern for the protection of creation as an expression of the concern of God himself.

We need to be attentive and responsive to the voice of God manifested in our diminished world and by the suffering of the poor. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI has stated that we must "listen to the voice of the earth". "therefore, this obedience to the voice of the earth, to life, is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, desires of the moment. To sum up, this is the first criterion to learn that life itself, our earth speaks to us and we must listen if we wish to survive and decipher this message of the earth. And if we must be obedient to the voice of the earth, this is even more so for the voice of human life. Not only we must heal the earth but we must respect each other, all others." (July 24, 2007 to the clergy of the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso).

Engagement with the world, as demanded by God's word, requires that we look with new eyes at the entire created cosmos. "As men and women who believe in and proclaim the Gospel, we have a responsibility towards creation. Revelation makes known God's plan for the cosmos, yet it also leads us to denounce that mistaken attitude which refuses to view all created realities as a reflection of their Creator, but instead as mere raw material, to be exploited without scruple....I would like to echo the statements of the Synod Fathers who reminded us that "accepting the word of God, attested to by Scripture and by the Church's living Tradition, gives rise to a new way of seeing things, promotes an authentic ecology which has its deepest roots in the obedience of faith ... [and] develops a renewed theological sensitivity to the goodness of all things, which are created in Christ". We need to be re-educated in wonder and in the ability to recognize the beauty made manifest in created realities." (Verbum Domini 108)

For protection of creation is intertwined with God's call to believe and hope in His plan. Pope Francis appeals to all to be

‘protectors’ of creation and says that this involves everyone. “It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as St. Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God’s creatures and respecting the environment in which we live... Be protectors of God’s gifts!.... “Please, I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be ‘protectors’ of creation, protectors of God’s plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment” (Homily on the Feast of St. Joseph, 2013). Let this appeal from the universal Church move us to action with a sense of urgency.

Cardinal Oswald Gracias thanked everyone for the success of the Seminar. He stated that FABC has an educational role to awaken and conscientize people about the climate change challenge. The use of mass media, organizing conferences and inter-religious dialogues on Climate Change will help immensely to create such awareness. Besides, the Cardinal emphasized the need of living an Eco-spirituality through our life-style. He suggested the following concrete steps:

- ❖ The FABC should encourage all the FABC Conferences to adopt concrete plans to protect the integrity of creation and set apart a competent person to animate groups and communities for this mission.
- ❖ The OHD should prepare a handbook for the different groups, dioceses and Conferences of Bishops.
- ❖ A theological-pastoral document on climate change will be of great help for the local churches.

He said that the road ahead is challenging but with the help of God and the assistance of all the Asian Episcopal Conferences we will attain our goal.

VII. PARTICIPANTS

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