

Convening of Catholic Leaders with Senate Climate Solutions Caucus Co-Chairs

October 1, 2020

Remarks by

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Good morning, and thank you all for joining us today. On behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I want to extend a special thank you first to Senators Mike Braun and Chris Coons for offering their remarks and perspectives today on the Senate Climate Solutions Caucus, to Carla Fajardo of Catholic Relief Services and Scott Hurd of Catholic Charities USA for giving examples of how Catholic institutions are caring for creation, and to Marianne Comfort of the Sisters of Mercy for moderating our discussion. I especially want to thank all of our viewers following online today. A special welcome to all of the Congressional staffers joining us today during a very busy week. Thank you for all the work you are doing in this difficult time to encounter the public policy challenges of today and to advance the common good.

We are convened virtually today to speak about “good news.” As the Catholic Archbishop of Oklahoma City and Chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, I am entrusted with announcing the Gospel. Today, I will try to apply the good news to the hope and possibilities of working together to protect and safeguard the environment, our common home.

Good news can be a difficult topic today. I am well aware of, and offer my sincere prayer for, the hardships that so many Americans are experiencing right now –and I imagine that includes many of you—due to illness or the loss of a loved one from the pandemic, racial injustice and violence, lost jobs and income, and the impact of numerous disasters around the country: fires, floods, tornadoes and hurricanes. Yet, amidst hardship, suffering and sin, there is “good news” to proclaim. God is always doing something new.

In my remarks today, I will explain why the Catholic Church cares about the environment, and summarize some of the actions we are taking in the United States. Then I want to tell you how the Senate Climate Solutions Caucus and its bipartisan and inclusive model connects deeply with a Christian vision of environmental stewardship. And finally, I will highlight what Catholic social teaching contributes to climate policy and use examples of how Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities, and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development put these principles into action. Collectively, the contributions of the Senate

Climate Solutions Caucus and Catholic agencies, along with numerous other organizations that serve human beings and the environment, are “good news” that we can appreciate and encourage.

To begin, why does the Catholic Church care so much about the environment? Many of you may be familiar with Pope Francis’ 2015 letter *Laudato Si’*, which laid out the case in great detail, drawing on Scripture and centuries of Catholic thought. The words *Laudato Si’* come from an ancient prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, in which he praises God through gratitude and love for all of creation, for the animals, the sun, the moon, the stars, wind, water, and fire. All things that sustain and give life. As we hear in the beginning of book of Genesis, “God saw everything he had made, and behold it was very good” (Gen. 1:31). God’s goodness is expressed in the abundance and diversity of creation. From our tradition, we hear that everything that is, our world, our very selves – body and soul – all is a gift. We did not make it. It was given to us. And it is very good. The environment, in the language of Catholic social teaching, is a common good. It is for everyone. Everyone relies on it to live a decent life. And we can only enjoy this good by working together to care for it.

The USCCB was quick to address climate change as a moral challenge, issuing a document in 2001 called “*Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good.*” Numerous individual bishops, Catholic State Conferences and bishops in specific regions of our nation had issued statements about environmental stewardship and climate change. However, Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* spurred unprecedented environmental action around the world, including in the United States. This year, on the fifth anniversary of its publication, we used the occasion to take stock of the many spiritual, educational, practical and social activities that we and our partner organizations set out to do in response to *Laudato Si’*.¹ Among these, I include policy positions taken by the USCCB on federal environmental legislation and regulations such as support for bills sponsored by members of the House Climate Solutions Caucus like the Climate Solutions Commission Act, the Energy Innovation and Carbon Dividend Act and more recently the Great American Outdoors Act.

¹ <https://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/upload/summary-activities-laudato-si.pdf>

Furthermore, the USCCB, along with the Catholic Climate Covenant and other partners, support the Vatican's "Laudato Si' Action Platform," a 7-year project for institutions to reach sustainability that was released earlier this year. The Action Platform encourages Catholic communities, institutions, Dioceses and parishes around the world to become more sustainable, living witnesses of Christian stewardship. The USCCB is also a partner of the Season of Creation, where Christian churches around the globe celebrate a special time of care for creation, from September 1st to October 4th, the feast of St. Francis of Assisi, only a few days away. In fact, one of the inspirations for this event today was the Season of Creation. Finally, I should mention Pope Francis' numerous remarks about the COVID-19 pandemic, echoed on several occasions by the U.S. Bishops. The Pope recognizes our collective suffering and fragility, and proposes a vision for rebuilding a more just, caring and generous world, which includes our relationship with the environment.

Turning to the Senate Climate Solutions Caucus, it is, of course, not formally or even informally associated with Christianity or the Gospel, yet it is certainly "good news." When Pope Francis addressed the Joint Meeting of Congress in September of 2015, he referenced *Laudato Si'*, and said:

This common good also includes the earth, a central theme of the encyclical which I recently wrote in order to "enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (ibid., 3). "We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all" (ibid., 14). . . I am convinced that we can make a difference and I have no doubt that the United States – and this Congress – have an important role to play²

I think that when Pope Francis said those words, the Senate Climate Solutions Caucus was exactly the kind of forum that he had in mind, one based on inclusive dialogue, finding common ground and forward-looking solutions.

Allow me to offer two important policy reasons why the Senate Climate Solutions Caucus is "good news." First, the environment, and environmental policy, require a united and

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html

concerted effort on behalf of all of us – a conversation “which includes everyone” – and in the political realm this means **bi-partisanship**. This is Pope Francis’ main point about ecology in his address to Congress, and is reflected in the title of the encyclical: “*on the care for our **common home***.” The Caucus adheres to a membership scheme that ensures that for every new Democrat to join the caucus, a Republican must join alongside them (and vice-versa). Creation belongs to all of us, and it requires that we care for it **together**. The environment, often a fragile gift, cannot afford to have disagreements and partisan self-interests get in the way of concerted, effective policy and action. This bi-partisan caucus is set-up to do just that and is a sign of hope amidst such growing political fragmentation and polarization. That is good news!

And it leads me to my second point. Along with unity, we need **action, effective** action. The environment, which as Christians we see as the Lord’s Creation, is made up of a complex web of interrelationships and long-term processes that keep a delicate ecological balance in harmonious function. Effective environmental policy requires **long-term legislation** that protects species, biomes, and processes as well as human interactions and wellbeing. We cannot rely on executive orders that can be rolled back to protect the environment. **We need Congress to act!** *Creation needs Congress to act, in bi-partisan fashion and for the long-term.*

For these reasons and many others, the USCCB has followed closely and encouraged the Climate Solutions Caucus. Years ago, when the **House** Climate Solutions Caucus was formed, the USCCB worked closely with congressional members and staff, supported legislation, encouraged advocacy and even hosted the Co-Chairs’ lead staff during our Bishops’ committee meeting. It is indeed “good news” that now we also have a **Senate** Climate Solutions Caucus – still in its first year – and I look forward to a long-lasting collaboration to support and promote climate solutions.

How can the Catholic approach help us to be more just and generous in our care for the environment? One of the key contributions, expressed in *Laudato Si’* and in the concrete works of CRS and CCUSA that we will hear more about later is *integral ecology*. Integral ecology recognizes that “everything is connected”, and that we must address ecological problems by seeking sustainability, unity and the common good for people and the planet. These ideas must

be concrete and real. They must have integrity. Permit me to briefly outline three important points of integration exemplified by the work on climate change by these faith institutions.

First, *integration between the needs of the environment and the needs of people, especially the poor*. It is the poor and vulnerable who suffer the most from environmental degradation. As the Pope said in *Laudato Si'*, we need to be careful with a “‘green’ rhetoric” that tends to “forget the excluded” and the poor: “we have to realize that a true ecological approach is also a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (49). As we will hear, the work of **Catholic Charities** gives insight into how the poor are the most affected by disasters – hurricanes, forest fires, floods, tornadoes – and our duty to help their immediate needs. Assisting the poor and suffering from the effects of these disasters is also a matter of justice.

Second, and related to the first point, is the *integration of climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation* – we need to do both. In the tradition of notable global climate negotiations, adaptation has often been underappreciated. Climate mitigation—reducing our greenhouse gas emissions through multiple strategies—rightly gets much attention, and is an urgent and necessary focus of climate policy. However, adaptation is equally important: right now, there are millions of people suffering the effects of climate change, and they need our help. There are also plants, animals and ecosystems which must be protected. Even the best climate mitigation efforts – most of which fall far short of the Paris Agreement goals – will take decades to be felt. The vulnerable need help right now, not tomorrow. **Catholic Relief Services** are true experts in climate adaptation. Their work around the world helps people to adapt to climate change, taking into account their cultures, faith, health, local economies and ecosystems, and other needs, while also addressing climate mitigation and its long-term effects. This integrated approach is key for finding effective climate solutions, and CRS leads the way with their witness.

Third, is the *integration between faith and science*. As Pope St. John Paul II reminded us, “Faith and reason” – and I emphasize science as a central form of “reason” – “are like two wings

on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.”³ We are in desperate need of good reasoning, good governance and good science – *and above all truth* – for climate policies. Policy experts, lawmakers, institutions, businesses, citizens and faith communities all need to work together, guided by the best science available. However, we also need to remember that science has its limits and blind spots; there are things that science cannot see. And here, faith can often make visible what is invisible to data sets and computational models: the suffering of ordinary people, the capacity to move hardened hearts, the contemplation of the beauty of nature for its own sake, and the ability to give without counting the cost.

One example of the integration of science and faith is a project of the **Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD)**. Over the years, CCHD has invested \$6.6 million in 80 organizations across 28 states and 42 dioceses to help communities address local issues related to the environment. And CCHD doesn’t simply throw money at problems; rather, it funds community organizations directly and empowers the community to address its own needs. This year, CCHD awarded a \$500,000 national grant to a project titled "Caring for Creation, Caring for Community," to assist low-income people in the Southeast "to overcome the impacts and address the root causes of climate change" over the course of the next five years.⁴ The project will use the best science to identify the impacts of disasters on poor communities, and help these communities – which often can’t afford evacuations, relocations and growing housing costs – to adapt and become more resilient. Inspired by faith principles, the project sees the connections between climate and the environmental injustice suffered by communities of color. It connects the environmental justice of *Laudato Si’* with our efforts for racial justice, including the U.S. Bishops’ pastoral letter against racism, “Open Wide Our Hearts.”

Inspired by all these examples and with a “wide open heart,” I am delighted to be joined by our presenters today. We are united by “*the care for our common home*” in a forum that invites us to integrate our faith and reason, our love for nature and love for the poor, and to put

³ http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html

⁴ <https://www.ncronline.org/news/earthbeat/us-bishops-anti-poverty-program-puts-laudato-si-action-500000-grant>

forward hopeful climate politics, policies and actions. The pandemic has exposed rampant economic inequality, racial injustice, the precarious condition of immigrants, political polarization and our disregard for creation expressed in the breakdown of the food supply chain and links between the coronavirus death rates and air pollution. Cognizant of this painful reality, we must insist on lifting up the “good news.”

As Christians, our good news is that injustice and death do not have the last word. We have hope that God is always calling us to something new that does not pass away. It is good news today that we are joined by two Senators forging a path for bi-partisan climate legislation. We have outstanding examples of faith organizations implementing real, practical climate policy on the ground. It is good news that we can work together, Democrats and Republicans, climate adaptation and mitigation experts, those moved by faith and those moved by reason and science, to find solutions to climate change. And the great news is we can ask God to bless our work. Blessed by God’s grace, with the fruits of the earth and the work of our hands, **together**, we can help create the “good news” of climate solutions for our common home.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from our other presenters.