

# THE IMMEDIATE URGENCY OF THE CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL EMERGENCY AND THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE

## 1) CONTEXT

We are aware that, at this moment, the coronavirus emergency is the prime focus of immediate attention. This is perhaps a time to reflect on what is important, and a time that can show us how much can be achieved in a short period of time in response to an emergency, if we act with urgency. Long term of course, climate change and environmental destruction is an even greater threat to our lives and our future. The poor, in particular the poor of the global south, will suffer most from the economic effects of the virus and the lockdowns. This is even more true of climate change, which itself is only part of a complex problem produced by excessive, ever growing, consumption and production, largely by those of us in the global north.

## 2) THE POOR SUFFER FIRST AND MOST

In general, every fraction of an increase in temperature means that more energy is absorbed into the atmosphere, causing more violent storms and more extreme floods. Droughts become more extreme and unpredictable in pattern. Food supplies are reduced or completely lost, homes are destroyed and livelihoods lost. More people have to move just to survive. The poor are - and will - also suffer first and most from climate change, despite having done the least to cause it. From increasing droughts and floods harming food crops, especially in already vulnerable parts of Africa - to those in the UK unable to cope with, or afford to move out from areas of, regular flooding. And from conflict arising from water shortages, as has already happened in some parts of the world, such as Darfur in Sudan (1). Areas of India and Africa have been abandoned because there is no water and nothing can live there due to excessive and prolonged drought (2) . Increasingly powerful 'super-typhoons' and hurricanes have devastated the Philippines and the Caribbean. Some Pacific islands are considering abandonment due to continued inundation from rising sea levels and increasing storm surges. (3) The UN biodiversity report says one million species are now at risk of extinction due to habitat loss and climate change. All of these situations will continue to get worse if we chose to do nothing. Human civilisation as we know it is at risk (4) We are at a time of 'kairos', a time of choosing. **We need to act now.**

## 3) THE 1.5C TARGET

The 2015 Paris Summit agreed a 1.5C target temperature rise above pre-industrial levels, as an ambition with the support of the Vatican among others, because of the vulnerability of large numbers of people, such as those in low lying states. (We are currently at 1.0C above pre-industrial levels.) The 2018 IPCC Report strengthened the case for the 1.5C target. Among the reasons for this is the increased risk of very dangerous, 'climate tipping points' which could be passed between 1.5C and 2C, if indeed that has not already begun. There is a huge difference in the future for the human family, and for life on God's Earth, between 1.5C and 2C temperature rise (5)

## 4) 10 YEARS LEFT OF 1.5C CARBON BUDGET

However, in 2018 Global Carbon Brief said that we had about 10 years until we have used up the 1.5C carbon budget, at current rates of emissions (before coronavirus), according to the IPCC 2018 Report (6). In 2019, carbon emissions were projected to rise by 0.6% (7), and before the coronavirus hit, 2020 emissions were still on a rising trend (8) although this was slowing. If emissions continue to rise, the carbon budget will be used up more quickly. While there has been a decrease in carbon emissions due to the shrinking economy during the Covid 19 lockdown, it is highly unlikely this will be enough or will last long enough to make a significant difference to the overall trend.

## 5) DANGERS OF PASSING 1.5C TEMPERATURE INCREASE

The world will not suddenly become uninhabitable for humans if the 1.5C target is breached. The time lags involved, and the gradual nature of climate change, mask the real and massive threat it brings. However as previously stated, scientists are concerned that a 2C rise will take us past

'tipping points' that could have disastrous runaway effects on climate change. Worryingly, such is the level of global inaction that the UN emissions report of November 2019 says we are on course for a 3C rise even if current (weak) climate commitments are met.

## **6) INADEQUACY OF EU, UK & OTHER 2050 ZERO EMISSIONS TARGETS**

In December 2019, EU leaders agreed to commit the EU to a 2050 net zero emissions target (9) Like the UK 2050 zero emissions target, this sounds like it meets the requirements of the IPCC and the 1.5 degree target. The reality is, the recent Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee report says the government has not done enough and is not only failing even to meet its own low targets but is going backwards.

However, we do not need goals just for 2050. We, above all, need them for 2020 and every following month and year to come, and specifically up to 2030. Because distant net-zero emission targets will mean absolutely nothing if we continue to ignore the carbon dioxide budget - which applies for today, not a faraway future. If high emissions continue like now even for a few years that remaining budget will soon be completely used up. In terms of the 1.5C target, it does not matter if emissions are zero even as soon as 2040, if we have used up the 1.5C carbon budget already by, for example, 2030.

## **7) DRASTIC EMISSIONS CUTS NEEDED NOW**

The 2018 IPCC Report conservatively stated that global emissions need to have been cut by 45% by 2030 to be on track for the 'two-thirds chance of staying under 1.5C'. That translates now into a global cut in emissions of 7.6% every year from now (that is, the end of 2019 /start of 2020) until 2030. (10) Instead, pre-coronavirus, emissions were still rising.

## **8) REASONS WHY THE 2050 TARGET IS INADEQUATE**

### **i) GLOBALLY:**

There are 3 reasons why the world needs to aim for an earlier target than 2050:

**A) The IPCC's own report says that their scenario leaves between a third and a half risk of overshooting the 1.5c target. This level of risk is far too high. You wouldn't take a one third risk of injury in crossing the road. (11)**

**B) The IPCC process requires total consensus across hundreds of scientists. So, while it is absolutely authoritative, it is also very slow and over cautious in its statements.**

**C) At the moment, there is growing evidence that many of the warming processes are happening much faster than predicted. For example, the melting ice caps, the Australian bush fires and others we will outline below.**

### **ii) FOR THE UK:**

Whatever target date we think the whole world needs to aim for, there are also 3 reasons UK needs to aim sooner:

**A) Poorer countries will not be willing to make sacrifices or take initiative, if rich countries like the UK are not willing to take the lead**

**B) As the country where the industrial revolution started, we have among the highest historic emissions per person, in the world. And as former Conservative Environment Minister Sir John Selwyn Gummer said on Radio 4 - those historic carbon emissions is what our wealth is built on.**

**A) and B) above, are the reasons for the 'common but differentiated responsibilities' that are acknowledged in the Paris Agreement.**

**C) Although the UK government has set that 2050 target, its policy is nowhere near what is needed to achieve it. If anything, it is going in the other direction.**

#### **9) MOST EMISSIONS ARE CAUSED BY RICH COUNTRIES & RICH PEOPLE**

In general, according to a report by Oxfam, the top 10% wealthiest people globally emit 50% of all consumption based carbon emissions, while the poorest 50% contribute only 10% of emissions (12). The 3.5 billion poorest people, “live overwhelmingly in the countries most vulnerable to climate change,” according to the report. Meanwhile, the ‘wealthiest 10%’ includes about half of people in the UK and virtually everyone in the UK is in the top half of global average wealth.

#### **10) 2030 TARGET FOR UK & CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ENGLAND & WALES / SCOTLAND**

Given these factors, we believe that the world needs to be aiming - at the very minimum - for net zero emissions by 2040, and the UK by 2030. Very ambitious, but practically possible, if we want to do it. As the coronavirus emergency response is showing, what seems impossible is in fact possible, if we decide to make it happen. That is to say, if the political and social will is there.

#### **11) ADDITIONAL FACTORS FROM RECENT REPORTS**

These environmental realities have been apparent for some time. However, 2020, pre-coronavirus, even more worrying information has come to light:

**A) Tropical forests are losing their ability to absorb carbon much faster than even the worst case scenario predictions:** (13) As we know, the Amazon rainforest is a vastly important ‘carbon-sink’, along with other such ‘sinks’, and has been absorbing much of the extra carbon emissions humanity has been creating. There are a number of other such forests, in the Congo basin, Indonesia, etc. New research published in the journal “Nature” in March 2020, based on years of evidence collecting, shows that these forests could even become carbon emitters as early as the 2030’s. One of the senior authors of the research said, “This is decades ahead of even the most pessimistic climate models.”

**B) There have been a number of reports recently of Arctic and Greenland ice melting much faster than expected,** which could lead to significantly higher sea level rises than expected (14)

**C) The Australian fires were far worse than any prediction** - the scale of the early 2020 fires was not supposed to have happened yet - not for some decades (15).

**D) A recent study said that for every 1C temperature rise, 1 billion people could be living in areas with ‘near unliveable heat’** (16). Or effectively, 100 million for every extra 0.1C temperature increase.

#### **12) THE IMPORTANCE OF THIS MOMENT**

**Given the importance of eliminating UK carbon emissions in the next ten years, and of reducing them immediately in order to do this, it is imperative that everything possible is done now to shift the moral and religious, social and political ground towards serious emergency action on climate change.**

**We have seen in the space of a few weeks what the realisation of a real emergency can do to change government policy, and social and economic reality. It remains to be seen what impact this has on our collective ability to realise what we can do about the other - ultimately bigger - emergency of climate change and environmental destruction - especially species loss.**

**Without the kind of change we are asking for, the 1.5 degree C target is highly unlikely to be achieved. If that is true, there is a need for honest discussion about this now. We need to discuss what the 2 degree C path, or worse, will mean (as spelled out by the IPCC) as well as: (a) how much human effort and resources need to go into slowing the global warming process, and,**

**(b) how much is needed to adjust to the immediate extremes of weather and to prepare for what is to come (insofar as we can ascertain that).**

**It seems to us essential that these matters are spoken about.**

### References

- 1) “There are many dimensions to the conflict, regional, national and international. But, environmental factors - such as encroaching desertification - have led to considerable tension between nomads and more established farming communities.” -  
<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/understanding-darfur-conflict>
- 2) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-48552199>
- 3) <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/will-tuvalu-disappear-beneath-the-sea-180940704/>
- 4) See: Address of His Holiness Pope Francis on the theme: “The Energy Transition and Our Common Home”, 14 June 2019 at the Vatican.  
[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190614\\_compagnie-petrolifere.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190614_compagnie-petrolifere.html)  
‘Today’s ecological crisis, especially climate change, threatens the very future of the human family This is no exaggeration. For too long we have collectively failed to listen to the fruits of scientific analysis and “doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain” (Laudato Si’, 161)...time is running out!... We do not have the luxury of waiting for others to step forward, or of prioritizing short-term...benefits. The climate crisis requires “our decisive action, here and now” (Laudato Si’, 161)... civilisation requires energy, but energy use must not destroy civilisation!’
- 5) see: <https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/2030-or-bust-5-key-takeaways-ipcc-report>
- 6) <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-why-the-ipcc-1-5c-report-expanded-the-carbon-budget>
- 7) <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-global-fossil-fuel-emissions-up-zero-point-six-per-cent-in-2019-due-to-china>
- 8) See the same link as (6)
- 9) See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50778001>
- 10) See UN Report: <https://unfccc.int/news/cut-global-emissions-by-76-percent-every-year-for-next-decade-to-meet-15degc-paris-target-un-report>
- 11) Cf “Climate Action for the Common Good: Reflecting the principles of Laudato Si’ in our transformative response to the climate crisis” p10, by CIDSE :  
[https://cafod.org.uk/content/download/43947/513520/version/3/file/CIDSE\\_LS\\_Principles\\_Paper\\_Nov\\_2017\\_light.pdf](https://cafod.org.uk/content/download/43947/513520/version/3/file/CIDSE_LS_Principles_Paper_Nov_2017_light.pdf)
- 12) See: <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/the-worlds-richest-people-also-emit-the-most-carbon>
- 13) See: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/04/tropical-forests-losing-their-ability-to-absorb-carbon-study-finds>
- 14) See: “Scientists find far higher than expected rate of underwater glacial melting” -  
<https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/01/200129091428.htm>  
And: “a new study focusing on Denman Glacier in East Antarctica” - because of a deep on-land trough:  
<https://www.slashgear.com/melting-faster-than-expected-this-vast-glacier-could-raise-seas-by-5-feet-24614202/>  
And : “Greenland’s ice sheet melting seven times faster than in 1990s - Scale and speed of loss much higher than predicted, threatening inundation for hundreds of millions of people” -  
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/dec/10/greenland-ice-sheet-melting-seven-times-faster-than-in-1990s>
- 15) See: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-51590080>
- 16) See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-52543589>