

UNITED NATIONS LEADERSHIP FORUM ON CLIMATE CHANGE
CHURCH OF THE HOLY NAME, UNITED NATIONS PARISH,
NEW YORK, USA
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN
SUNDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2009

Introduction:

I am delighted to have been asked by the global Catholic networks Caritas and CIDSE to lead a delegation of Bishops and other delegates here to the United Nations in New York. The Bishops in the delegation include Archbishop John Onaiyekan from Nigeria in Africa, Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini from Guatemala in Central America and Bishop Theotonius Gomes from Bangladesh in Asia. The principal celebrant at this Mass is Archbishop Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop here in New York. Also important members of the delegation include representatives from the developing world itself and Directors of Catholic development agencies from various parts of the world. Our aim is to support and encourage world leaders assembling in New York this week to take action to address the impact of climate change on our planet and, more especially, the poorest people on it. As you may know, Ban Ki Moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, has convened a special meeting of Heads of State, business leaders and representatives from civil society next Tuesday to discuss this issue. We are here to ensure that the voices of the poorest and most marginalised people are heard.

For we should be in no doubt that **climate change, caused by human activity, is having a dramatic impact on our natural environment and consequently on humanity.**

God's gift of creation:

In the first few verses of the Bible, we read how God created our planet. God's gift to humanity of the natural world and our intimate relationship with it is made abundantly clear from the dawn of creation. God commands man and woman "to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it." (Genesis 1:28)

How tragic then that we have interpreted this command as a licence to exploit our planet without thought for the future! How scandalous that those people who have done least to cause global warming should be the ones to suffer most from it!

Our world is deeply scarred with poverty. Today 30,000 children will die because they are poor. Tonight 900 million people will go to bed hungry, their bodies and hopes for the future stunted through the lack of a decent meal.

Global warming is hurting people in developing countries most. The UN estimates that 262 million people were affected by climate related disasters between 2000 and 2004.¹

My experiences

I have seen for myself the impact of these disasters. Earlier this year, I visited **Burma**. There I met people affected by cyclone Nargis which devastated the country. 134,000 people died, their lives washed away in the torrential storms which hit parts of the country.

¹ UNDP (2007) Human Development Report: Fighting Climate Change – Human Solidarity in a Divided World

One young man told me how he escaped with his wife and young child. As the flood waters rose, the three of them tried to reach higher ground. Soon they were engulfed in the raging waters. They tried to swim away. The wife gave her son to her husband knowing that she could no longer hold him as she found it increasingly difficult to stay afloat. In the darkness, she eventually lost her grip and was swept away. Her husband did his best to hold onto his son but the waters were too deep and his son drowned in his arms. He told me of how he placed his son's body on a piece of wood which floated past, pushing it gently away. With it went his will to live and he tried to find a way of killing himself. Of course, he did not. The poor may lack food and health but their fortitude and faith in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds is indomitable.

In **India** a couple of years ago, I met women who showed me their small landholdings where they were trying to grow food for their children and maybe some for a little extra income. All spoke of how the seasons are changing, of how the rains are no longer predictable, making it difficult to know when to plant and to harvest. This increases their food insecurity and forces people deeper into poverty as they look for other ways to pay for food.

On Thursday of last week, I met a head teacher, Victor, of Lombetta High School in **Tanzania**, along with six of his pupils, with his school being twinned with Holy Rood High School in Edinburgh. He indicated that over the past years the ice cap on top of Mount Kilimanjaro in his area of Tanzania had been gradually reducing in size, with the dry seasons getting longer, making it ever more difficult to produce sufficient food for the townships in his area.

It seems that in every part of the world people are being affected by our change in climate.

The fierce urgency of now:

Your great fellow country man, Martin Luther King, once said:

“Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. We are faced now with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now.”²

It is the **“fierce urgency of now” that brings us to New York this week.** Our society seems to have become immune to what is urgent. When banks go bust, as they did in your country and mine last year, governments seem able to mobilise extraordinary energy and efforts as well as unconscionably large sums of money to bail them out.

This response stands in stark contrast to the **ponderous efforts to address poverty and climate change.** I understand that politicians have many, sometimes competing, demands placed upon them. I know that most of them care deeply for the poor and the planet. I applaud them for the efforts they have already taken in recent years to stand by people living in poverty.

But we know more can and must be done. At this most urgent time, when if we act, we can end dangerous climate change and help poor people adapt to its effects – now is indeed the time for leadership and courage!

Development – the new name for peace:

In our second reading tonight, St James tells us that: “Peacemakers, when they work for peace, sow the seeds which will bear fruit in holiness.” (James 3:18) In his great encyclical on development in 1967, *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI wrote that **“development is the new name for peace.”**

² Quoted on page 1, UNDP (2007) Human Development Report: Fighting Climate Change – Human Solidarity in a Divided World

And so we come to New York, in this great enterprise of solidarity and love for our fellow women and men, to help sow the seeds of peace by sharing the Church's message of prayerful and practical concern for all. Indeed we come as, Pope Benedict has written recently to "defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life..."³

Our Holy Father has shown his own deep personal concern for these matters by encouraging those involved in the United Nations Summit to "enter into their discussions constructively and with generous courage."⁴ Indeed he sets out the Church's own concern that "matters concerning the environment and its protection are intimately linked with integral human development."⁵

I have heard it said that it is not we who hand on our planet to our children. Instead it is they who loan it to us. Anyone who has seen a child receive a gift will know of the look of wonder and joy in their eyes. In tonight's gospel, Jesus places a child right at the centre of his vision. It is the simplicity, the straightforwardness and the joy of a child which we are called to emulate in our relationship with God's great gift to us of the earth.

Of course, there are those who are sceptical about the science. But I cannot help reflecting on that argument which the disciples were having on the road to Capernaum about who was the greatest? They had spectacularly missed the point of what Our Lord was saying about his impending arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. They were too wrapped up in their own self-importance and status.

We must not be so wrapped up in a concern for our status, nor so obsessed with our security and well-being that we do notice the plight of others around us. The fierce urgency now defined by the scandalous waste of life in poor countries and the damage which our way of life has wrought to our natural world demand **a new understanding and a renewed reverence for the holiness of the planet**. The fruit of this holiness will be a future in which all God's creatures can "have life and have it to the full". (John 10:10)

Conclusion:

I end my words tonight by inviting you to pray, as St James encouraged us to do. Let us pray for those people charged with taking decisions at this meeting here in New York this week and over the next few months – that they may set aside their own desires and look with loving concern and solidarity on those who are weakest and most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and poverty.

I also ask you to pray for those of us on the delegation that we may defend the truth of our faith with humility, conviction and charity.

I hope you will forgive me if, as a Cardinal coming from Scotland, I end my remarks tonight by quoting a prayer from our national poet, Robert Burns, from one of his most famous poems:

"Then let us pray that come it may,
(As come it will for a' that,)
That Sense and Worth, o'er a' the earth,
Shall bear the gree, an' a' that.
For a' that, an' a' that,
It's coming yet for a' that,
That Man to Man, the world o'er,
Shall brothers be for a' that."

³ Para 1, Caritas in Veritate 2009

⁴ Pope Benedict's message to General Audience, 26 August 2009

⁵ Ibid.