

THE OCEANIA CATHOLIC BISHOPS' PASTORAL LETTER ON CLIMATE CHANGE

We, the Catholic Episcopal Conference of the Pacific speak from the ocean to communicate the prophetic and pastoral voice of the Churches regarding the threats that climate change imposes on vulnerable Oceania Island peoples.

1. The Oceania Context

Our home, Oceania includes the three island sub-regions of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, plus Australia and New Zealand. Our home is made up of 14 independent countries and approximately 10,000 islands. Our Oceania home has around 43.2 million people which makes up about 0.54% of the world's population. Our Oceania home is vulnerable from two main threats, namely climate change and economic exploitation and both have destructive impacts on the environment.

Climate Change Victims

Our Oceania home is severely threatened by climate change, rising sea levels and depleted resources and migration trends are beginning to reflect those challenges. Our Oceania home experiences some of the most frequent and violent natural disasters. Five of the most vulnerable atoll islands threatened by sea level rising are Tuvalu, Kiribati, Marshall, Carteret, Maldives – four of these islands are in our Oceania home.

Economic Injustices

Our Oceania Island states have weak economies and hence we are very vulnerable to the exploitation of economic powers. Mining and extractive companies carry out businesses that destroy the environment and deny our peoples' livelihood. These industries include land mining, gravel and black sand extraction, logging, and fishing. Deep sea mining poses a new threat. Four Oceania Island states namely, Tonga, Cook Island, Nauru and Kiribati have given permission for deep sea mining projects.

Climate Change Narratives

Current climate narratives are important because policy and development are built around these narratives. Therefore, corrective narratives are essential for effective responses.

Pacific Island Forum Narrative

The Fifty Second Pacific Islands Forum's held on 11th November 2023 in Cook Island clearly communicated that fossil fuel and carbon emission are the key drivers of climate change. Carbon emission causes global warming which in turn melts the ice resulting in sea level rise. Pacific Island Forum calls world leaders to implement the Paris Agreement. They strongly called for an immediate transition towards Fossil Fuel Free Pacific and limiting global average temperatures to 1.5 degrees. Pacific Island Forum main narrative is clear: 'Save Tuvalu, save the World.'

Tuvalu Narrative

The Tuvaluan government's climate narrative makes it clear that climate change is not just a future threat, but a contemporary challenge which has already been experienced. Tuvalu is vulnerable to sea level rise and ocean related hazards. Adaptation particularly through land reclamation has been portrayed as a means of protecting Tuvalu from sea level and environmental extreme events such as storm surges. Currently land reclamation is only planned for the capital, Funafuti.

Tuvalu land reclamation serves two purposes: first, to protect this shoreline [on Funafuti] from further wave attack; second, to provide new raised safe land. Reclamation is viewed as creating space to protect existing land, and creating new space to facilitate development that will alleviate other impacts of climate change, such as increased food insecurity. In doing so, this new space also creates time for future adaptation whilst delaying the possibility of emigration. Within the Tuvaluan climate adaptation, space-creation has become synonymous with time - creation. (Chrono 11)

Climate Change Refugees

During the Fifty-Second Pacific Islands Forum, Australia pledged to create "a special mobility pathway" that will enable Tuvaluans to go to Australia to work, study and live. Australia has

offered to receive 280 Tuvaluans a year as well as covering areas around security, migration and climate change.

Resilience in Kiribati

The current Kiribati president Hon. Taneti Mamau stated that he has moved away from his predecessor's (Anote Tong) climate narrative 'we are sinking' to climate resilience. He said that through this narrative, the World Bank has donated millions of dollars to Kiribati for climate change projects.

2. Analysis: Critique on current narratives

The Oceania Catholic bishops argue that these climate narratives reflect short-term solutions to the climate change reality. They do not address the root cause of the climate crisis, rather they only serve to move the narratives away from the root cause.

Along the same vein, Pope Francis in *Laudato Deum* states that "the necessary transition towards clean energy sources such as wind and solar energy, and the abandonment of fossil fuels, is not progressing at the necessary speed. Consequently, whatever is being done risks being seen only as a ploy to distract attention." LD 55

What is Church's narrative?

Pope Francis' letters, *Laudato Si* (2015) & *Laudato Deum* (2023) point out that the technocratic paradigm is root cause of the climate crisis and the current process of environmental decay. The technocratic paradigm tends to see all of reality as raw material awaiting human use, rather than a living reality, intrinsically valuable in its own right and therefore worthy of our respect. This paradigm does not respect human being's relationship and dependence to creation.

Oceania Catholic Bishops Key Statements

Fossil Fuel Root Cause of Climate Change

The Oceania Catholic Bishops concur with science by reminding the world that fossil fuel is the key driver of climate change. Fossil fuels causes carbon emission which in turn contributes to global warming. Global warming melts the ice and causes sea level rise. The root cause of climate change is fossil fuels. Therefore, the Oceania Bishops strongly say **NO TO FOSIL FUEL**. The solution is to seek alternative sources of power.

Weak Commitments Towards the Parish Agreement

The Oceania Bishops feel helpless and vulnerable because international commitments towards addressing climate change are weak. Pope Francis points to his: “Today we can state that, the accords have been poorly implemented, due to lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of noncompliance. The principles which they proclaimed still await an efficient and flexible means of practical implementation. Also, that “international negotiations cannot make significant progress due to the positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good.” LD 52. Oceania Bishops plead to our global sisters and brothers to ‘ACT NOW WE ARE SINKING’.

Short Term Solutions

The current narratives and developments are short term and do not address the root cause of climate change. They deny people of the reality of climate change. Pope Francis points out that “short-term solutions will keep us “trapped in the mindset of pasting and papering over cracks, while beneath the surface there is a continuing deterioration to which we continue to contribute. The Pope states that we have been led to believe that all climate and environmental problems can be solved by new technological interventions. He warns us that this is a form of homicidal pragmatism, like pushing a snowball down the hill. LD 57

Pope Francis adds “Short term solutions are not good enough.” Worse still, they move the climate narratives away from the root cause as well as hiding the reality from people. Policies and development are often built on the dominant narratives. Hence wrong narratives produce wrong policies and development plans. We have to correct the narratives of climate change and not to leave it solely in the hands of the economically powerful.

3. Theology of Vulnerability

The Oceania Catholic Bishops experience vulnerability with our people. However, the cross of Jesus gives us hope. Jesus’ hanging on the cross reveals God as vulnerable. God to suffers and understands our suffering. The bible shows that God is always on the side of the oppressed and suffering. The Cross of Christ reveals that God works far differently than do our movies and our imaginations. The Cross reveals the power of God in this world, a power that is never the power of muscle, speed, brilliance, physical attractiveness or a presence that leaves another no choice. God’s power works through vulnerability. It’s this power that has the last words. It is

the power upon which love and community can be created because it alone softens rather than breaks the heart. It is in vulnerability that lies the secret to coming to love and community. To be vulnerable is an attractive power. St Paul states, “when I am weak then I am strong”. (2Cor 12:9-11.) (Ronald Rolheiser, *The Cross and the Passion*)

4. Call for Action

Oceania peoples rooted in relationships with people, land and the sea. “We are the *vanua* (land) and the *moana* (ocean), and likewise the *vanua* and *moana* is us.” Climate change and economic exploitation threatens our very dignity, identity, livelihood and existence.

Message to Oceania Peoples

Inspired by the vulnerable God, the Oceania Catholic Bishops, call Oceania Island states to a stronger and committed solidarity to address the root causes of climate change, particularly carbon emission. We call on Oceania Island states to join in solidarity to amplify our cries and the cries of the *vanua* and *moana* to world, so that the world undergoes an ecological conversion. In the face of the powers of economic globalization, the vulnerable Oceanian Islands need a globalized mission.

Oceanian Islands, let us join hands to fight this monster. Together we can! Let us heed the Pope Francis’ call: We must rise together! This is the power of vulnerability, the power of the cross. The Pope points out clearly: “The demands that rise up from below throughout the world, where activists from very different countries help and support one another, can end up pressuring the sources of power. It is to be hoped that this will happen with respect to the climate crisis. For this reason, I reiterate that “unless citizens control political power – national, regional, and municipal – it will not be possible to control damage to the environment’ . LD 38

Pope Francis’ calls for the participation of all. Special recognition of radicalized and vulnerable groups: “In Conferences on the climate, the actions of groups negatively portrayed as “radicalized” tend to attract attention. But in reality, they are filling a space left empty by society as a whole, which ought to exercise a healthy “pressure”, since every family ought to realize that the future of their children is at stake. (LD58)

The Church is the largest global institution. Can the Church use this platform to put ‘a healthy pressure’ on the global community?

Message to the International Community

Like little children we cry to our big sisters and brothers, the international community for immediate and effective commitments to immediately move the world to a fossil fuel free world. We do not want to be fooled and lied by short term solutions that do not address the root causes of climate change.

You alone are the Lord. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you. (Nehemiah 9:6)

Let us 'Go out to the whole world; proclaim the gospel to all creation. (Mark 16:15)