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Fr. Sean McDonagh interview

Rich Heffern | Dec. 14, 2009 NCR Today

Irish Columban Missionary Fr. Sean McDonagh responds to questions in Copenhagen, Dec. 14.

You have participated in previous U.N. climate change conferences. Do you see some evolution? What makes this one different from the previous conferences?

There is an evolution. I began attending U. S. climate change conferences in Nairobi in 2006. The following year the Bali Road Map was produced at the meeting in Denpasar. This Road Map is supposed to culminate here in Copenhagen with a legally binding treaty to cover such areas as Mitigation, Adaptation, Clean Development Mechanisms and a number of other areas. Copenhagen is crucial, because the Kyoto Protocol runs out in 2012, and, as yet, no successor treaty has been put in place.

What is the most urgent step that you think should be made today?

The conference needs to get negotiations back on track and come up with a serious, legally binding treaty. There are only six days left and there is so much to do. Annex I countries (rich countries in the jargon of the conference)have to be realistic in terms of how much they are willing to cut their greenhouse gas emissions and contribute to the Adaptation Fund. According to the 4th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the emission cuts need to be in the region of 25 percent to 40 percent of 1990 levels by 2020, if the rise in the average global temperature is going to be stabilized at below 2 degrees Celsius. Even this will cause huge problems for poor countries in terms of severe weather, floods and droughts, rising sea levels, and melting glaciers. It is estimated that the Adaptation Fund will need $100 billion dollars annually by 2020 to meet these challenges for poor countries.

What do you think religions can contribute at this moment? How can they give support or challenge today?s political leaders and our societies?

If climate change is the most serious problem facing humanity and the planet now, then it must be the most serious issue for religions. This is particularly true for Christianity ? an incarnate religion. The message of Jesus is for the Life of the World. In John 10:10 Jesus says, ?I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.? You cannot have life to the full on an impoverished planet, shorn of one third of its species, all happening in a period of less than one hundred years.

Religions need to understand the magnitude and urgency of climate change. That means taking good, independent science on board. Then religions need to discern how they present God?s creation in their teaching and clarify the place of humans within creation. In Catholicism we have an ambivalence attitude towards creation. In the pre-Vatican II Prayer after Communion for the Sundays of Advent we prayed: God to teach us to despise the things of Earth and love the things of Heaven. This is a long way from the vision of the Book of Proverbs where God is seen playing with and rejoicing with all Creation.

When we get our ?God-talk? right, we need to look at our ethical teaching. Once again, in the Catholic tradition, ethics has been God-centred and human-centred. In 40 years of hearing Confessions, I have never heard anyone confess that they did something to mar the beauty of the planet or destroyed any aspect of its fruitfulness. Yet,

the imprint of sin is so prevalent in the world around us, when we survey the damage which climate change is causing, not just to humans but to other species as well. We now need to include creation in our ethical framework.

The heart of every religion is celebration. We need to include creation in our liturgies ? thanking God for its beauty and fruitfulness; confessing our arrogance towards other creatures, how our lifestyle wounds and destroys creation, imploring God to give us the courage to seek new, sustainable relationships with the planet. The Catholic Church should include a Season of Creation in its liturgical calendar. The Season of Creation runs for the four or five Sundays in September before the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Each Sunday focuses on a different theme ? Rivers, Oceans, Mountains. Naturally, local environments would be celebrated. There is a website where relevant texts and songs can be accessed.

Finally, all religions promote relevant ascetical practices to help believers live in an authentic way. We are encouraged to fast and do penance. Often, in the past, the link between a particular ascetical act and the motivation for it performance was not always clear. It is today. For example, scientists tell us that if all of humanity ate meat like people did, traditionally, in Asia, then the Earth could support a population of 7 or 8 billion. If, however, everyone on the planet ate meat like North Americans or Europeans, then the Earth will only be able to support about 1.5 billion. Faced with this reality, local churches, or even the universal church, might wish to introduce a number of meat-free days each week. The same might be said for the way we use water or fossil fuel. The underlying urge of modern economics is to promote consumerism as much as possible. This is what leads to economic growth ? which is a Holy Grail for many politicians and economists. However, it is this spiraling consumerism which is destroying the planet. Religions need to challenge this and promote lifestyles where people are happy with ENOUGH.

The facts we are confronted with are very threatening. How does one speak about hope in such context?

Here again religions have much to offer. I was the chair of the Board of Greenpeace Ireland when I returned to Ireland in the mid-1990s. What people want from Church people is that they, first and foremost, be truth-tellers. In other words we do not minimize the challenges and dangers. To date, Catholic Social Teaching, which has been admirable in many area of human life, such as a just wage and respect for others, has been poor on our relationship with God?s Earth. This is very clear in the Compendium on the Social Teachings of the Church. The chapter on the Environment is very poor both in terms of theology and understanding of ecological issues. Though published in 2004, there is only one paragraph on Climate Change and one paragraph on the destruction of Biodiversity. For a Church which claims to be Pro-Life and which has access to researchers in hundreds of Universities, this is simply irresponsible at this crucial period in the Earth?s history.
One of the great needs for those who are working for change in the area of social justice or the environment is hope. In the Christian tradition, hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but it is also a task for Christians to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit today to literally, Renew the Face of the Earth.

How far can we trust science and technology to resolve the climate change crisis? Should we take into account the limits of science and technology?

We need good, accurate and independent science. This is more and difficult to access, as in recent decades Corporations have colonized the Science Departments of many of our Universities, especially in the area of the biological sciences and Chemistry. They now decide what is taught in biology, chemistry, and even geology. While science is important ? if one takes seriously that we live in a finite world, then we cannot continue to have exponential levels of economic growth. Science will not save us. We need to live in a more sustainable way, which ultimately spring from our moral and religious values. Pope John Paul II was very clean on this in a document published on January 1st 1990, entitled, Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation.

It is important to remember that technological solutions, which appear almost miraculous at one period, often have a sting in their tail. The best example is, of course, chlorofluoroCarbons (CFCs) which were discovered in the early part of the 20th century and were considered a great break- through in the field of refrigeration. They were stable, non-inflammable and non-toxic chemicals. Five decades later, scientists in the Antarctic realized that they were responsible for destroying the Ozone Layer of the atmosphere.

Would you link the climate change crisis and the recent financial and economic crisis?

There are links, but there are profound differences. The links revolve around theories which see no limits to creating money for a few, and exploiting natural resources. In the financial world, bankers though that they had discovered some magic, mathematical formulae which would minimize, or eliminate risks, and create enormous wealth ex nihilo. They were profoundly wrong. Capitalism in its various manifestations, discount the natural world altogether from its calculations. In doing so, they have promoted plunder of the natural world, and a cavalier attitude toward dealing with the waste produced by our industrial societies. Both are externalities which do not have to be accounted for and, after all the market will take care of everything. It hasn?t, and it will not. What you get is impoverishment of the majority of people, especially in the Majority world and destruction of the earth.

But there are profound differences. As we have seen, it is possible to bail out the banks and recapitalize them with taxpayers money. When humans bring about irreversible ecological changes, such as is happening with the increase of greenhouse gases, it is impossible to bail out the environment. If Copenhagen does not come up with a robust treaty that will see a peaking of greenhouse gas emissions by 2015, then there is no possibility of keeping the average global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius. No amount of money will be able to repair the damage for the 30 million Bangladeshis who live in low-lying areas in their country. Melted glaciers in the Andes will mean no water for the 10 million inhabitants of Lima, Peru. These are just two examples among thousands of others. Everyone on the planet will suffer, but the poor will suffer most.

Are a good response to the climate change crisis on the one side and the care for the development of poorer countries not contradictory?

Care for the Earth and care for humans are inextricably linked. Human beings are not able to access energy directly from the sun. We need plant life and other creatures that eat plants. We cannot survive for more than a few minutes with fresh air, for a few days without water and a few weeks without food. We are directly dependent on the natural world, though we often forget this in our economics and even our theology. If we destroy habitants were plants or other species grow, then human well-being will diminish. If we pollute water, our tears will be toxic. The late Fr. Thomas Berry was fond of repeating that, you cannot have well human beings on a sick planet.

Greed is the vice which facilitates the plunder the planet. It is the same vice which controls and exploits other human beings for our own good. We need to create institutions which do not allow powerful, rich individuals, corporations or nations to plunder the earth and, in the process, enslave other human beings.

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