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Benedict XVI & the Environment

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 8, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Hurricane Sandy and its aftermath is still a harsh reality for many tens of thousands of people whose homes were destroyed, or whose ability to access public transportation has been compromised, or who still have no electricity in their homes. Rising sea levels make all bad storms more destructive than they otherwise would be, and it is well past impossible to deny that the incidents of extreme weather are becoming more common. Sadly, it is not at all clear that the nation?s political landscape will permit the kind of steps needed to address this issue. It is shocking that climate change was not mentioned in any of the three presidential debates.

In the event, Pope Benedict XVI has been one of the most visible public voices calling for renewed attention to environmental issues, and not just any kind of attention but theological attention. Indeed, his teachings on the environment are one of the most obvious developments of Catholic social teaching during this pontificate. Long before Sandy consumed the Jersey shoreline and then the nation?s attention, a group of scholars, working with the USCCB, were planning a scholars? conference on the Holy Father?s teachings on the environment. That conference begins tonight.

Bishop Bernard Unabali from Papau New Guinea will deliver the symposium?s opening address tonight at 7:30 p.m. in Hannan Hall Room 106 on the campus of Catholic University. The talk is free and open to the public. Bishop Unabali oversaw the relocation of many residents of the Carteret Islands in his diocese. These residents, among the world?s first ?climate refugees,? were forced to abandon their islands due to rising sea levels.

I have been working with the USCCB and the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change on this conference, which is co-sponsored by the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies. Thirteen theologians from across the country will deliver papers. NCR will be reporting on the event in the future. But, it is heartening to see the Church ahead of the curve on an issue of enormous importance, as well as an issue with profound pro-life AND social justice implications.

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