

Should we leave climate change to scientists alone?

by Ralph C. Martin

Pope Francis issued his Encyclical Letter, On Care For our Common Home, <http://laudatosi.com> in May of this year. Since then criticism has come from several sources, including politicians, to suggest that the Pope should stick to matters in his church and leave climate change and ecological issues to scientists.

Perhaps anticipating the criticism, Pope Francis refers to his inspirational guide, Saint Francis of Assisi who “shows that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human.” And with straight forward candour Pope Francis states “our common home is falling into serious disrepair.”

Pope Francis goes on to state, “reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most..... International negotiations cannot make significant progress due to positions taken by countries which place their national interests above the global common good.” Although he does not refer to Canada, it is safe to argue that we have allowed our politicians over the last decade to place Canada squarely in this culpable status.

Pope Francis then addresses his church directly. “We believers cannot fail to ask God for a positive outcome to the present discussions, so that future generations will not have to suffer the effects of our ill-advised delays.” It’s hard to quarrel with this pragmatic, spiritual admonition.

Mark Carney, a Canadian, and currently governor of the Bank of England, also warned about the increasing financial implications of climate change and advised insurers that they are heavily exposed to climate change risks. Interestingly, there was less push back to his warning. My two years of selling life insurance, years ago, taught me that insurance actuaries have sharp pencils when calculating risks. It’s worth listening up.

A few months ago a court in The Hague ruled that the Dutch government must cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2020 rather than their original plan of up to only 17% in comparison to 1990 levels. The court not only advised but ruled that the government of the

Netherlands has an independent legal obligation to its citizens and not to only to other states with which it negotiates.

The Dalai Lama who can be a burr under some political saddles, also agrees with Pope Francis on climate change and asks other fellow religious leaders to “speak out about current affairs which affect the future of mankind.”

I recall a friend telling me years ago she would stop attending a church because the pastor made her feel uncomfortable about how she and her family were living. “She provides comfort and spiritual guidance and also leaves me feeling so uneasy every time I go to church,” my friend summarized her complaint. I smiled and suggested she was probably in an excellent church community.

Pope Francis does not limit our search for insights to spirituality. “Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality.” Today our bent toward continuing with a model of economic growth, too much waste and too much consumption may be partly due to a lack of imagination about how else we might want to live.

It is clear to me as my colleagues and I at the University of Guelph collect more data about food waste that it will take more than data to convince people to shift their habits and to reduce food waste. At this point, the collective transformative potential to reduce food waste is still missing. Fortunately, the Pope lobbed a ball, in support, here too. After lambasting excess consumption he notes that “about a third of all food produced is discarded, and whenever food is thrown out it is as if it were stolen from the table of the poor.”

Our indigenous neighbours’ stories include seeing ourselves in the context of seven generations in the past and seven generations in the future. In support, Pope Francis says “It is no longer enough ... that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn.”

As painful as it is, a steady look at the prospect of future generations not surviving is required. To dodge this contemplation, because it is too difficult or lacks sufficient data, is no longer an option. Realistic ways forward can emerge from the clear sightedness of integrative knowing.

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