The Work of the Church and Care for Creation:
Implementing an Integral Ecology in Praxis

Welcome to everyone who has traveled to Creighton for this important convening on environment and climate issues. Thank you so much, Bishop McElroy, for that moving reflection on the urgent call of *Laudato Si* to the American people at this moment in history. It is an honor to share this moment up here with you – you are a consistent voice for the poor, the vulnerable, and the migrant, and an advocate for justice in the United States Catholic Church.

I will build on Bishop McElroy’s beautiful theological reflection by sharing some of the work that the Catholic Church is doing, from the halls of Congress, to the streets of Baltimore, to the mountains of Honduras, to stand in solidarity with those who are most affected by the exploitation of our shared home and how the Church addresses both the effects of this exploitation and works to prevent it from taking deeper root through its concretization in our local, national, and international policies.

My name is Meghan Goodwin, and I serve the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as Associate Director in the Office of Government Relations.

Care for creation is very near and dear to the heart of Pope Francis. Just last week, he convened leaders of some of the world’s most powerful oil and gas companies and investment funds. By the end of the meeting, executives were pledging to adhere to the Paris agreement and to help the world transition to a low-carbon future. This meeting followed a personal appeal by the Pope to avert a “climate emergency” that risks “perpetuating a brutal act of injustice against the poor and future generations.”

At the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, I and several of my colleagues do our part to further this priority of the Holy Father. We work closely with our valued partners, including the Catholic Climate Covenant, who worked so hard to put this conference together. Their vision and tireless work are a real asset to the Church. Before I continue, can I ask that we give a round of applause for the Covenant and for Creighton University for putting together this fantastic event?

Thank you so much for your dedication and hard work to organize Catholic leaders from around the country to act for climate justice.

I will take a few minutes to speak to the work done by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on climate issues. As I said, I work in the Office of Government Relations. In this role, I communicate the priorities of the Catholic bishops to Members of Congress. My portfolio focuses on Justice, Peace, and Human Development, both domestically and internationally. My daily work involves building relationships with Members of Congress and their staff and communicating the priorities of the United States Bishops to lawmakers on issues relating to climate justice, domestic poverty, and international justice and peace. This involves engagement with Congress, sometimes alone and sometimes in coalition with other Catholic and Christian groups, on legislation that seeks to address degradation of the environment and slow factors that contribute to climate change. The pairing of advocacy related to domestic and international poverty with environmental justice advocacy is a natural fit. In *Laudato Si* Pope Francis writes that “a true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”* (LS 49)

I have seen the intersection of exploitation of the environment with exclusion of the poor arise again and again in the way that local, national, and international policies are crafted, and how they impact those who live in the poorest parts of our cities, or who subsist on the land for survival, and how they exacerbate existing inequalities, sometimes even leading to ethnic or religious conflict.

Before I delve into these dimensions further, I would like to give you a brief description of the current federal landscape relating to climate-related legislation and regulations. In my work, I engage primarily with dynamics at the federal level. In the last Congress, a bipartisan Congressional caucus formed, called the Climate Solutions Caucus, which aimed to craft bipartisan solutions to climate issues. In this Congress, the Climate Solutions Caucus has been dissolved and replaced with a bipartisan group known as the “House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis.” While many hearings have been held, we have yet to see a comprehensive, bipartisan legislative approach to address climate change pass both chambers.

There have been a few bipartisan bills on ocean acidification that have passed the House, as well as one large climate bill that passed down party lines – which generally means that it will not pass the Senate nor be signed into law by the White House, but instead serve as a marker bill at this present moment. We have seen a few bills that would implement a tax on carbon emissions, but those have had difficulty moving forward. The USCCB has endorsed a carbon tax bill introduced by Congressman Rooney of Florida, who previously served as U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See. They have also endorsed the Nonprofit Energy Efficiency Act, a bipartisan Senate bill. We have built strong relationships with offices that are leading on environmental issues, as well as with offices that we would like to see take stronger leadership. Just last month, I accompanied the Bishop Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Social Development, Bishop Dewane of Florida, to meet with Members of Congress from Florida to express our desire to work more closely with them on climate issues.

Under the current Administration, the EPA recently announced a rollback of its rule on Mercury and Air Toxics Standards –the MATS rule for short. This rule regulates emissions of air toxins from power plants. Exposure to such toxins, which include mercury, are correlated with increases in cancer, cardiovascular diseases, and other illnesses. Unborn children exposed to mercury can have major neurodevelopmental setbacks. The USCCB Bishop Chairman of Pro-Life Activities, Archbishop Nauman, released a statement together with Bishop Dewane criticizing the proposed change to the MATS rule. Archbishop Nauman said “the proposed change to the Mercury and Air Toxics Standards (MATS) rule is troubling since it is well-documented that pregnant mothers and their unborn children are the most sensitive to mercury pollution and its adverse health effects.” Bishop Dewane said that “the MATS rule reflects a proper respect for life of the human person and of God’s creation – a great example of the integral ecology called for in Laudato Si.”

Together with other national Catholic groups, I visited with several Senate offices to express our grave concern, from both a justice and a pro-life perspective, to these regulations being rolled back.

The environmental work of the USCCB does not only focus on federal legislation. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which is situated in the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, gives grants to small, local groups committed to empowerment of those who are usually excluded from political processes. These local groups, which are comprised of leaders from the community served, identify issues that are of greatest concern to the poor in their communities. In several cases, the greatest issue facing their communities is environmental degradation.

One group that received a grant from CCHD, called the United Workers Association, operates in Baltimore, just about an hour north of the nation’s capital.

Baltimore City’s population is 62.8% African American, with 72.2% of the population from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds. Over the past 25 years, the city has rarely seen a poverty rate lower than 1/5 of its population, which is above the national average of 16%, and well above Maryland’s rate of 10%. Baltimore has a child poverty rate of 33.5%, which is 12 percentage points higher than the national average.

This CCHD-funded group, United Workers, was started by a group of students who learned that the City of Baltimore planned to build an incinerator less than a mile from their school. This incinerator would be the largest in the nation. It would be permitted to burn 4000 pounds of trash per day and emit 240 pounds of mercury per year. Their community, Curtis Bay of south Baltimore, already had the highest level of toxic air emissions in the state, and in 2008 had the highest level of toxic air emission in the entire nation.

Exposure to mercury can damage many parts of the human body, including the cardiovascular system, kidneys, brain, spinal cord, and nerves. It can cause hearing and vision problems. Babies exposed to mercury in the womb can have brain damage, hearing, and vision problems. Curtis Bay, this impoverished community which had already been exposed to some of the highest levels of these carcinogens, was going to be the site of even worse environmental degradation.

*This* is what Pope Francis is talking about when he speaks about inaction on the environment being a “brutal injustice against the poor.” He writes in *Laudato Si* that “the human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet.” Citing a 2012 pastoral letter on the environment by the Bolivian Bishops’ Conference, he continues, “Both everyday experience and scientific research show that the gravest effects of all attacks on the environment are suffered by the poorest.” (*LS 48)*

We cannot separate exploitation of the environment from exploitation and exclusion of the poor. All human society is impacted by the way we treat the environment, but it’s the poor who feel it first, and most acutely.

These students worked for five years – engaging, educating, and organizing their local community against the establishment of the incinerator – and won. The city decided not to build the incinerator in their community. Without the tireless work of these community organizers, those who would have been most impacted by the pollution and environmental degradation would have had no voice in a decision that would dramatically impact the health and lives of themselves and their neighbors.

The United Workers created a Community Land Trust in South Baltimore and are focusing on efforts to get the city to embrace zero waste – looking now to the existing BRESCO incinerator, the city’s worst air polluter.

The pattern of exclusion of the poor from decisions that both exploit the environment and cause disproportionate suffering for the most vulnerable repeats itself again and again across the globe.  The continent of Africa, for example, has by far the lowest rates of carbon emissions in the world.  However, the effects of climate change have had dramatic consequences for fragile states in that region of the world. Pope Francis speaks of this in *Laudato Si,* quoting the New Zealand bishops, who ask what “Thou shalt not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive.” (LS 95)

Take, for example, the West African region.  One of the major areas in my advocacy work focuses on stabilization of fragile states and addressing root causes of conflict.  The USCCB policy expert on Africa with whom I work closely has identified a key element to these root causes of conflict: climate change, which has led to desertification in the savannah of the Sahel region.

In West Africa, climate change is a contributing factor to the rise of violent extremism and ethnic and religious conflict.  Across West Africa, from Senegal to Nigeria to Niger, 40 million nomadic herders, known as Fulani, rely on pasture lands for grazing.  During the wet season, they graze northward, and during the dry season they migrate south.  However, the growth of the Sahara Desert into the Sahel region because of chronic reduced rainfall has caused the Fulani to graze their animals further and further south, into traditional farming areas where the herders have no preexisting relationships with the surrounding communities.  Governments across the Sahel region have failed to predict and manage these changes in order to avoid conflict turning violent. The Fulani are often Muslim, and the farmers are often Christian. The conflict over the growing scarcity of resources exacerbates ethnic and religious differences and is morphing into a broader and deeper conflict over identity and ideology.  We see this especially in Nigeria, where there has been an explosion of conflict between Fulani and other ethnic groups.  In Nigeria, a social contract exists between Christians and Muslims guiding the transfer of Presidential power between them.  The destabilization of these relationships in a large-scale way, such as disputes over increasingly limited fertile land, is upsetting that social contract.  In Mali, the Islamic State has radicalized a group of Fulani, linking their land dispute to a broader sense of ethnic and religious identity and exclusion.  We are seeing a growing influence of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as homegrown insurgents, across the region.

When visiting with Members of Congress who oversee State and Foreign Operations around the globe, or who help to direct where our foreign assistance dollars flow, it is critical to introduce a nuanced narrative of these ethnic and religious conflicts that accounts for the ways in which the effects of environmental degradation drives migration patterns in ways that can cause conflict over increasingly limited resources.

Catholic Relief Services, the international humanitarian development and relief arm of the USCCB, has witnessed how climate change has contributed to root causes of the patterns of migration we are seeing around the globe. In Honduras, for example, coffee growers have been displaced by rising temperatures, which impedes their ability to grow coffee beans. Many migrate up mountainsides seeking cooler temperatures. Increased heavy rains contributed to the spread of the coffee leaf rust outbreak of 2012-2013 which decimated farms, forcing many agricultural workers to seek different employment. The decision to migrate northward is a complex one made over the course of many months or years, but adverse effects of changes in the climate on the agricultural industry in Central America are likely a contributing factor. Catholic Relief Services works with these farmers to try to build a sustainable industry and value chain, but these challenges remain. I often work with Catholic Relief Services to ensure that international assistance to the Northern Triangle and other vulnerable regions of the world remains funded and implemented, and I am very impressed by CRS’ commitment to both relief and development.

In their 1987 pastoral letter *Sobre la relacion del hombre con la naturaleza,* the Conference of Dominican Bishops writes that “Peace, justice, and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism.” (LS 92) Pope Francis writes that “It is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem” of environmental degradation. “We are faced not with two crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.” (LS 139) He specifically speaks about the role of social institutions, which includes governmental legislation and regulation. “Social ecology is necessarily institutional,” he writes, “and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national, and international communities. Within each social stratum, and between them, institutions develop to regulate human relationships. Anything which weakens those institutions has negative consequences, such as injustice, violence, and loss of freedom.” (LS 142)

In the United States, the institution of representative democracy must resist succumbing to populism, division, and polarization. A comprehensive approach to an integral human ecology, encoded in law, must reconcile the protection of all life, especially in its earliest and latest stages, with care for creation and policies that facilitate participation of the marginalized in our political, social, and economic systems. What this looks like, pragmatically, is a bipartisan approach to legislation that expresses an ethic of responsibility to the stability of the law itself as well as our system of government.

So how does this translate for you all gathered here? As Catholics first, we need a spiritual renewal that embraces radical inclusion, especially of the poor, the marginalized, and the most vulnerable – including the elderly and the unborn – with intentionality in our behavior as it impacts the earth. As incarnate beings called to relationship with God and one another, we should participate in the institutions that govern our social relationships, including our governmental institutions.

I encourage you to vote early and often – participate in political primaries and ask candidates to take positions on environmental policies. The sooner you engage, the greater the likelihood that environmental policy can become a central point of discussion between political candidates. What you want to try to avoid is reaching a general election between one candidate who is ambivalent or hostile to environmental issues, and another who is amenable to them – in short, for environmental policy to become a wedge issue. The fastest way to a lack of meaningful action on any issue is for it to become a wedge issue. No matter where you fall on the political spectrum, early engagement could help to create a scenario where both candidates are debating who has the superior solution to addressing environmental degradation. This will help to keep them accountable for delivering a legislative solution stabilized by bipartisanship.

Help other people register to vote and learn about when primaries are taking place. Some states allow voter registration to occur at age 16, although they cannot vote until they are 18 – if you are in one of these states, volunteering to host a voter registration drive at a high school could be very effective. Given our previous reflections on the tendency of the poorest communities to be marginalized from the political process, I would look specifically at high schools that serve lower income populations.

Then, stay informed about the status of legislation that would address these issues. You can sign up for “Action Alerts” from the USCCB on environmental issues by texting “USCCB” to 50457. Once you fully register, you can select “environmental justice” to receive action alerts that pertain specifically to environmental issues. This will allow you to receive text alerts if a piece of legislation is moving that the bishops either endorse or oppose. I encourage you to act on these alerts, especially by calling your Representative or Senators, and to share this resource with your friends.

Finally, live a life of simplicity and generosity. Avoid materialism whenever possible. Give to some of the institutions I mentioned today, like CCHD or Catholic Relief Services, who help to empower communities that are most disadvantaged by climate change and environmental exploitation.

I hope you find these reflections and recommendations helpful in your discernment for deepening your personal and political engagement in this issue. Thank you, and God bless.