

Protect poor in acting on global warming, bishop says

WASHINGTON – Congress should heed the warnings of a recent report on global warming, with priority given to how climate change will affect the poor, the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Policy urged.

In a Feb. 7 letter to congressional leaders, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., said the recently released report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has clearly and compellingly outlined the case for urgent action to address the potential consequences of climate change.

The letter urged the U.S. government to base responses to global warming on the common good "rather than the demands of narrow interests," and to place priority on the poor "who will bear the greatest burdens and pay the greatest price for the consequences and costs of climate change."

In a June 2001 statement, "Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good," Bishop Wenski noted, the bishops said climate change "is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest-group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family."

On Feb. 2, the intergovernmental panel, an international working group established by two U.N. agencies, approved a summary report for policymakers, "Climate Change 2007: The Physical Science Basis," which "assesses current scientific knowledge of the natural and human drivers of climate change, observed changes in climate, the ability of science to attribute changes to different causes and projections for future climate change."

Among its details, the report said, "Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level."

Bishop Wenski noted that the report makes clear that “continued greenhouse gas emissions at or above current rates would cause further warming and induce many changes in the global climate system during the 21st century that would very likely be larger than those observed during the 20th century.”

The report predicted that at the current rate of change, the following will occur:

- Snow cover and sea ice will contract, with increased thawing in the permafrost and arctic summer sea ice almost disappearing by late in the 21st century.
- Heat waves and heavy precipitation will become more frequent.
- Typhoons and hurricanes will become more intense, more frequent and more common farther north and south than has been normal.
- Precipitation will likely increase in high latitudes and decrease in subtropical regions, leading to more flooding in some regions and droughts elsewhere.

Bishop Wenski said, “The traditional virtue of prudence suggests that we do not have to know with absolute certainty everything that is happening with climate change to know that something seriously harmful is occurring. Therefore it is better to act now than wait until the problem gets worse and the remedies more costly.

“This precautionary principle leads us to act now to avoid the worst consequences of waiting,” he continued. “Prudence sometimes keeps us from acting precipitously. In this case, it requires us to act with urgency and seriousness.”

Bishop Wenski offered the help of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in working to address global climate change on the basis of making the poor a priority, pursuing the common good and practicing prudence.

“While no one has easy answers,” he said, “we ask you to help define and refine what prudence and the pursuit of the common good require. We seek your help in lifting up and focusing on how climate change will affect the ‘least among us’ – the poor, the vulnerable and the voiceless in our country and around the world.”

The USCCB wants to offer its voice to the national debate on climate change, Bishop

Wenski said.

“We participate not as climate experts or as scientists, but rather as pastors and teachers who fear that the moral and human dimensions of these decisions will be overwhelmed by political, economic or ideological pressures,” he wrote.