

Global Climate Change: Polar bears, penguins and people

Robert K. Musil, Ph.D., M.P.H.

I could see small figures on the sunny hills beyond me as a Maryknoll nun showed me a fresh wound on the villager she was helping here in Jilapa. The distant figures were *contras* -- counterrevolutionaries operating in this part of Nicaragua. Frankly, I was afraid.

Not long before, a small group of Americans and I had been briefed by a Sandinista Army Captain. His unit had accompanied our bus along the dirt road to Jilapa. "If there is combat, get down. Do not panic. Where there is panic, there is death!"

And so I marveled at the serenity that suffused Sister Margaret, the Maryknoll nun. This young Irish-American woman had been to Harvard Law School, had been an Assistant U.S. attorney in Massachusetts, and had given it all up to follow what radical Catholics were calling "the option for the poor." I had some skepticism about celibacy and nuns called to be brides to the church. It ended on that hillside.

I was worried about my wife and two small children at home, feeling stupid having come here at all. I also puzzled over how someone as successful as Sister Margaret had taken to heart those old Sunday School words. "Take up your cross and follow me." That day, I saw someone attempting to *live* a life like Jesus. I longed for that commitment, that courage, that serenity.

God, being sneaky, gave me another chance across the border in Honduras. Once again, I was afraid. I hesitated at the door of a medical aid shack in a refugee camp with families that had fled Nicaragua -- mostly women and children.

I can still see and smell that small, wooden building. Above the door was a poorly painted Red Cross. Inside were children and babies suffering from diarrhea and disease. Some were near death. Others had succumbed. What I remember is the fearfulness I felt even going near such a shack, let alone entering beneath that rugged cross. Finally, I did.

I do not claim to be born again. But in that camp in Honduras Jesus came to me. Or at least I felt and imagined him quite powerfully, as in a Biblical scene. I understood, vividly, what those stories we love were really about. Jesus is constantly with the poor, the outcasts, those with horrid diseases like leprosy. He risked, healed, and walked along dusty roads in places many of us would find quite scary.

I did not realize in Central America that I was being nudged somehow toward today's Earth Day Sunday, preaching about global climate change. I had been working for peace, against war and nuclear weapons. Over time, the effects of war on children and their survival led me to Physicians for Social Responsibility and on to environmental health and global climate change. It is how I came to understand that global climate change is also about peace, about children, about justice. It is not simply about melting ice and rising seas, polar bears and penguins.

And so, though I bring some needed secular tools to the subject, more and more, I want to speak as a Christian, from the depths of my soul, from who I am, or try to be. If you and I are to really walk with Jesus, to *feel* his words, we need to uncover again and again the courage and compassion of Sister Margaret and those medical aid workers moving so comfortably beneath a painted cross in Honduras.

The Biblical texts we need for this journey are not only those about the goodness of God's creation, the lilies of the field, the coming of rain in the desert. The essential

texts describe Jesus' ministry, his call to heal, to bring hope to suffering humanity, to do justice, to bring peace to those – especially the most vulnerable – who are in danger.

Jesus said, “In as much as you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.” Surely these words moved a Maryknoll nun to give up the courtrooms of Massachusetts. We know today more than 5 million mostly poor children die each year from diseases related to the environment – asthma, dysentery, cholera, malaria, and more. All are exacerbated by poverty, by war, and, increasingly, by the warming and disruption of our global climate. Rising temperatures lead to the spread of disease-carrying mosquitoes. Warming waters, drinking water fouled by floods, run off from heavy rains or hurricanes -- all bring bacteria that in the belly of a poor, malnourished baby may mean death, not merely diarrhea.

How many of us were able to pay much attention when, in 1998, Hurricane Mitch -- part of a growing pattern of more powerful hurricanes linked to global warming -- brought widespread flooding, disease, and over 11,000 deaths in Honduras? Or when Dr. Jonathan Patz calculated for the World Health Organization that climate change is already causing some 150,000 people to die each year?

Unfortunately, perhaps understandably, many Americans remain unmoved or unaware of such distant calamities presented in our society as either dulling statistics or simple sound bites. But like the Biblical Flood, global climate change, unchecked, will harm multitudes and most of God's creatures. Unless, like Noah and his wife, we choose to act. I love birds and trees and animals of all kinds. I am an environmentalist. But if we are to move more Americans, we need an approach to climate change that puts our fellow humans squarely in the picture.

We have seen the effects of climate change here at home through Hurricane Katrina. What moved us to action was not just the loss of wildlife or wetlands, but the death of some 2,000 people, mostly vulnerable minorities, and the displacement of over one million Americans.

Modern medicine has confirmed the Biblical truth that regardless of borders, we are equal in the eyes of God; that we spring from a common, ancient ancestor somewhere in Africa. We know that the breath of life flows through each of us and all around us. From studies by Philippe Grandjean, we know that a single molecule of mercury or PCBs released into the environment can make its way -- through evaporation, rain, and the food chain -- from a broken electric generator in Texas, all the way to the Arctic. There it enters the blood stream of an Inuit mother eating fish, crosses the placenta, and harms the learning and development of her beloved child.

The same is true when we turn on a light switch and a coal miner in West Virginia is injured or sickened in his work, or the minute particles from our coal-burning electric power plants -- hidden from view in our poorest neighborhoods -- enter deep into the alveoli of everyone's lungs -- causing some 30,000 deaths in the U.S. each year. We know, too, that each rise in temperature from climate change creates more ozone from our SUVs and trucks, bringing on more emergency visits to the hospital, more death and illness. Robert Bullard, a pioneer of the study of environmental racism, has shown that in Atlanta, one of the worst centers of urban sprawl and air pollution, it is African-Americans and the poor who suffer most.

So this Earth Day, on this glorious day that the Lord hath made, we Christians speak and act about the environment. Yet we know from the Bible, from the ministry and

words of Jesus, from the miracles of modern medical understanding, that the environment is not simply some lovely, green thing outside of us, apart from us. It is *in* us as well.

Every molecule passes through us, through the ecosystems that we are part of and which sustain us. God made the *whole* earth. God cares for *all* things. Not just polar bears, but *people*, penguins *and* the penniless, bunnies *and* babies, lilies *and* the learning disabled.

You and I are part of a growing movement concerned about global climate change. But it is not large enough. If we are to halt this threat to creation, we need to include coal miners, children with asthma, people who live near or work in the factories that make most of us comfortable while spewing pollution and promoting cancer. We must care and act on the injustices of poverty and war. Let us be clear this Earth Day. As Christians, we care about *all* creation; we care as much about God's children as we do about melting ice in glorious Glacier National Park or the extinction in Costa Rica of the breathtakingly beautiful Golden Toad.

So let us go forth, not only to celebrate God's good, green Earth, but to love our neighbors already suffering from the effects of climate change, in Atlanta and in Africa, in Houston and in Honduras. May we hear and *feel* God's words, God's loving presence. May we walk, even when fearful and unsure, along those long, dusty, dangerous roads -- where Jesus walks beside us.

Bob Musil is the former Executive Director and CEO of Physicians for Social Responsibility and is the Chair of 20/20 Vision, an energy security group. He teaches global climate change at American University and at the Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC. He is the author of the forthcoming *Hope for a Heated Planet: How*

Americans Are Fighting Global Warming and for a Better Future (Rutgers University Press, 2008). He is also chair of the Stewardship Committee and co-chair of the Caring for Creation Committee at Westmoreland Congregational Church of Christ, Bethesda, Maryland.