

## Statement on Environmental Justice

New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference  
2006



*“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.”*

**Pope Benedict XVI, Homily at Inaugural Mass, 2005**

What does the commandment “Thou shall not kill” mean when twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs poorer nations and future generations of what they need to survive?

What does it mean to respect life when 30,000 people die each day from poverty?

What does it mean to be stewards of the earth when up to half of all living species are expected to become extinct in the next 200 years?

Science and technology have brought many blessings to human existence. Over the last fifty years those blessings have included a greater capacity to meet basic human needs. But the benefits of these advances have been spread unjustly, often with an adverse effect upon the world’s most vulnerable populations. The existence of extreme poverty and environmental destruction in our world are not natural forces, nor acts of God, but result from human behaviour. That behaviour is driven by values, priorities and decisions which do not see human life as a paramount concern.

Our world is facing an ecological crisis, which could equally be called an economic crisis, or a poverty crisis. Its public face is the suffering of the poor and the degradation of our environment, at a time when accumulation of wealth and material goods has never occupied our attention more. That is why we see it primarily as a spiritual or moral crisis.

Climate scientists warn us that the decisions of this generation over the next twenty years will impact upon the future of humanity. For the peoples of the Pacific, climate change is already among the most urgent threats facing them. Rising temperatures and sea levels, and the greater intensity of storms and natural disasters, are already affecting the food and water supply for people on low-lying islands in different parts of the Pacific.

Long before these islands disappear into the sea, life on many Pacific Islands will become untenable. It is predicted that in the Pacific alone, there may be a million environmental refugees before the end of this century.

As in other parts of the world, those most suffering the consequences of climate change are those who have played the least part in contributing to it. People we may never meet, as well as those who are not yet born, will benefit or suffer as a result of the decisions we make and take in New Zealand and in the rest of the developed world.

As Pope Benedict said in his inaugural homily: “The external deserts are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast”. Protecting the environment involves moderating our desires to consume and own more, which create lifestyles that bring death to millions of other people. Consumerism, global environmental change and suffering in the developing world are inextricably linked.

At the personal level the suffering of others and the damage to our planet demand that we look closely at our own lifestyles. Individual acts of selfishness can create a society characterized by a desire for short term gain and immediate gratification over longer term needs and a wider view. In response, both individual and collective acts of selflessness are needed – of self sacrifice for the greater good, of self denial in the midst of convenient choices, of choosing simpler lifestyles in the midst of a consumer society. This does not mean abandoning the scientific and technological advances which have given us such great benefits. It means using them wisely, and in a thoughtful manner which reflects true solidarity with all the people of the earth.

Ultimately, this is a global problem requiring real global solutions. But individual Catholics, parishes, Catholic schools, religious communities and church organisations can play a big part by making different choices, such as using less energy or buying locally made goods which require less transportation. The world needs to reduce its carbon output by 80 percent, and some New Zealand households could achieve that overnight by simply changing the kind of car they drive. Avoiding water waste and excess packaging are two simple steps which can be acted upon by individuals and households.

But vulnerable members of our own society – such as the elderly – have suffered previously during power crises by going without necessities such as warmth and light, and we have to work to ensure that the costs of any changes to our lifestyles are borne by those who can best afford them.

Our faith and our religious tradition have much to offer the world at this time, including the importance of simplicity, and of learning to give up some things that we want, so others may have what they need. Our understanding that we are stewards of God’s creation, our solidarity with the poor, and our respect for the common good make the issue of environmental justice the responsibility of every person.