

Carmelites changing the climate

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This edition of *Assumpta* is dedicated to the question of climate change, and in this article I'd like to share with you some thoughts about why Carmelites should care about the issue, as well as some examples of how Carmelites are acting on this important subject. Perhaps it might inspire you to reflect further and take action.

Before anyone accuses the Third Order of 'activism' – that is replacing prayer with activity – it's important to remember that our Carmelite tradition is about contemplation, and both prayer and service contribute towards contemplative living. Contemplation is the free inflowing of God into the soul that is ready to receive God, or put more simply, friendship with God. The more contemplative a person becomes by cooperating with God's grace, the more their eyes, minds, hands and hearts are opened to see, understand, act and love as God sees, understands, acts and loves. Therefore, to be contemplative means to act as well as to pray. One activity supports the other. To be concerned about the environment is not to be distracted from our focus on God; quite the opposite in fact. The climate change crisis facing us needs us to respond with our prayers and our actions, as individuals and as communities. Activity must never replace the place of prayer in a Carmelite's life, but likewise prayer must never be used as an excuse for not acting when appropriate. Discernment is essential to get the balance right, and I hope this edition of *Assumpta* will help you in discerning whether or not to pray and act about the issue of climate change.

Climate justice is certainly becoming a primary mission for the Roman Catholic and other Churches. As I write this article, the BBC has just reported that Prince Charles met with Pope Benedict in the Vatican on 27th April. The focus of their conversation? Climate change.

What is climate change?

According to the U.K. government's *Department for International Development* (DFIP), in a briefing paper about climate change: 'Scientists agree that climate change is occurring. The earth's atmosphere acts like the glass in a greenhouse, allowing much of the sun's solar radiation to travel through unimpeded, but trapping a lot of the reflected heat trying to escape back to space. This process raises the temperature in the atmosphere, just as it does in a greenhouse. Since industrialisation began, emissions of 'greenhouse gases' (GHGs) – in particular carbon dioxide – have significantly increased, primarily due to increased burning of fossil fuels. As a result, heat has been trapped in the atmosphere and the earth's global mean surface temperature has begun to rise, reaching its highest level for 140 years. Even if greenhouse gas emissions were entirely halted, global temperatures would still be expected to rise over at least the next 50 years.' This information is derived from expert research by the Royal Society, the leading scientific academy of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, and is backed up by the United Nations' International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Who does climate change affect?

The Royal Society and the U.K. government predict that climate change will have a major impact on us in Britain. Increased temperatures will turn parts of the United Kingdom into scrub land, and the rising of sea levels caused by the melting of the polar ice caps will threaten coastal towns and the capital with flooding.

An even more severe impact of climate change is already being felt by the poorest countries in the world. Increased temperatures and reduced rainfall in Africa, Asia and Latin America mean that many poor people already face significant difficulty coping with existing climatic variability and recurrent severe weather events. Drought, floods and other extremes of weather seriously disrupt economic growth in many developing countries and inhibit poverty reduction efforts such as the Millennium Development Goals. Climate change threatens people's livelihoods and the assets upon which they depend. The countries suffering most from climate change are generally the countries which have contributed least to global warming. The poor of the world are suffering because of our excessive consumption in richer countries. Addressing climate change is therefore a matter of justice.

Readers with internet access might like to read the DFID resources on how climate change is affecting the poorest nations by visiting www.dfid.gov.uk.

Why should Christians be concerned about climate change?

Christians should care about climate change because the Bible and Church tradition teach us that God created a beautiful and good world which, according to the book of *Genesis*, he entrusted to humanity to care for.

Jesus, the 'firstborn of all creation' teaches us how to live in right relation with God and God's world. In *Matthew* 6 Christ speaks of sparrows, lilies of the field, and the beauty of the natural world. In the Eucharist, Christ took bread and wine, the fruits of creation transformed by human hands, and distributes them as his own self to transform the world. When Jesus related to the world and people around him, he did not exploit the resources available to him, or seek his own needs. He preached a word of hope to the poor, and words of warning to the rich.

The Christian climate change activist Mark Dowd points out that the earth is not ours to dispose of as we wish: "The Earth is the Lord's and its fullness thereof" (Psalm 24). When we celebrate the wondrous beauty of creation we do not indulge in idolatry; we see in the natural world pointers to the deeper reality of God's unfathomable power and creativity. As the Psalmist declares: "Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, shining stars; praise him, highest heavens, and waters above the heavens; Let them all praise the name of the Lord, at whose command they were created." (Psalm 148:3-5). This insight is picked up by St. Paul, model and teacher of Carmelites: "Since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." (Romans 1:20).

Christians are motivated to care for God's world not because of fear but because, as Mark Dowd puts it, "we respond simply because this is what God asks of us... we want our actions to be in total conformity to God's will for his magnificent creation. Engaging in activities which threaten the bounteous diversity of the natural world is nothing short of a blasphemy against the Creator, through whom all life moves and lives and has its being." Dowd, and many contemporary theologians, reject the 'Dominion theory' typical of some Evangelical Christians who claim that humanity has a right to do what it likes with God's world regardless of the consequences; there are even some Evangelicals who welcome the prospect of climate change since they reckon the 'end of the world' will bring about Christ's second coming and the state of 'rapture'. Serious theologians, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury, have rejected such abdication of responsibility, stating that 'to suggest that God might intervene to protect us from the corporate folly of our practices [with regard to the environment] is as unchristian and unbiblical as to suggest that he protects us from the results of our individual folly or sin... God's faithfulness stands, assuring us that even in the most appalling disaster love will not let us go, but it will not be a safety net that guarantees a happy ending in this world'. You can read more about Dr. Williams' recent speech on climate change in another article in this edition of *Assumpta*.

Operation Noah

Mark Dowd is Chair of Operation Noah, the first Christian campaign focused exclusively on climate change. It was founded in 2001 by Christian Ecology Link (CEL) and is now a joint project of CEL and Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. It encourages faith communities to tackle climate change because God's creation faces the most urgent peril, which, to be averted, requires a rapid and radical transformation of our economy and culture, away from irresponsible, selfish and ultimately dangerous lifestyles based on fossil fuel emissions, the boundless consumption of goods, and the exploitation of people and resources, towards simpler, liveable, supportable lifestyles.

Operation Noah is inspired by the biblical example of Noah, 'a man of integrity among his contemporaries' who 'walked with God'. Noah practiced true 'dominion' of creation by obeying God's will and nurturing the biodiversity of the earth. Noah gathered humans and animals together in the Ark, often seen as a metaphor for the Church or for planet Earth itself. The forty days and nights of rain reveal that the fate of both humanity and animals are bound up together. The rainbow after the flood is a sign of God's enduring fidelity to his creation and to the colourful diversity that lies at the very heart of it.

Catholic social teaching has stressed the importance of caring for the environment, and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has spoken out on the issue of climate change in conjunction with the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Pope Benedict has preached on the issue of climate justice on various occasions, saying that all people of good will must act together, now, to resolve the crisis threatening God's world.

Why should Carmelites care about climate change?

Those of us in Britain who are members of the Carmelite Third Order Secular know from our initial formation programme that all Carmelites are expected to be concerned with 'justice, peace, and the integrity of creation'. The integrity of creation cannot be distinguished from a concern for peace and justice, as the prophet Jeremiah declared, linking humanity's greed and environmental ruin:

This people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone away. They do not say in their hearts, 'Let us fear the Lord our God, who gives the rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps for us the weeks appointed for the harvest... they lie in gloom on the ground, and the cry of Jerusalem goes up. Her nobles send their servants for water; they come to the cisterns, they find no water, they return with their vessels empty. They are ashamed and dismayed and cover their heads, because the ground is cracked. Because there has been no rain on the land the farmers are dismayed; they cover their heads. (*Jeremiah 5:23-25, 14:2-4*)

No Carmelite can read these words without thinking of our father Elijah, and the way that rainfall seen from Mount Carmel was the sign of God's mercy on the people of Israel who had turned back to him.

The call for Carmelites to care for the created world has come from no less an authority than the Prior General himself. In 2006 the General wrote a letter entitled *The Lord Hears the Cry of the Poor*, highlighting the link between the way we live as Carmelites and the need to care for the world around us:

By means of the vow of poverty, God frees the human heart from disordered attachments to material things. Our world has abundant resources for each and every human being but the way in which one part of humanity chooses to live means that the majority must live in poverty... We must care for creation. All things have been created

to be used, but it is very easy to become enslaved by them. Many peoples are living at such a level that the good things of the earth that sustain human life are not being renewed and this will have disastrous effects on future generations unless we each choose to live in this world as good stewards and not as rapacious lords. (§24).

The Prior General goes on to link the question of caring for the poor and the world in which we live as an extrapolation of the *Rule of Saint Albert*:

Let us remember that in our time the best way to make manifest our vow of poverty is to faithfully fulfil the common law of work. Let us, therefore, embrace with enthusiasm the precept of the *Rule* which invites us to work assiduously, for we know that by our toil we co-operate in God's work of creation and, at the same time, develop our own personalities; by our active charity we assist our confreres, and all others; and we contribute to the good of the Order. (§58).

The Bible, Church teaching, and the Carmelite tradition are clear: we Carmelites have to pray and act on the issue of climate change.

What have Carmelites been doing about climate change?

Both as individuals and communities, Carmelites have begun addressing the question of climate change. Here are just a few examples...

In Madrid the JUCAR group of young Carmelites collect paper to sell to recycling companies. Not only do they reuse natural resources but the money they generate supports the Carmelite mission in Burkino Faso.

A number of new Carmelite buildings have been designed with environmental issues in mind. In the Dutch Carmelite Province the new community house and parish church in Almelo includes an ecological garden and an 'organic' form of architecture that is not only environmentally sustainable but creates a sense of wellbeing and connection to the natural world. At Thicket Priory near York, the Discalced Carmelite sisters have built a new monastery more suited to their needs that is well insulated, uses heat from underground pipes to warm the house, and has grass-covered roofs that retain warmth and reduce the visual impact of the monastery. They will move into their new home this month.

At Aylesford Priory a plantation of trees beyond the car park will help to off-set the carbon emissions of pilgrims and the friar community, provide a habitat for animals, and a place where people can relax and reflect. The Peace Garden currently being designed for the gatehouse drive at The Friars will have similar benefits.

Although the Carmelite Institute of Britain & Ireland (CIBI) is a distance-leaning institute, the members of its Executive Board still have to travel for meetings together. To reduce the impact this travel has on the environment, CIBI off-sets the carbon emissions generated by donating to Operation Noah's tree-planting scheme. CIBI also minimizes paper consumption by doing its teaching and marking electronically.

Carmelites provide hospitality and support to those campaigning to protect the natural environment. Carmelite friars have taken part in campaigns of Operation Noah, and the Carmelite Family in York recently supported CAFOD's Climate Justice campaign launch (which you can read about elsewhere in this edition of *Assumpta*). On 28th March members of *Carmel in the City* spirituality group joined protest marches in London demanding that the G20 summit of world leaders acts on poverty, jobs, and climate change. The same day many Carmelites joined in the international 'Earth

Hour' initiative (www.earthhour.org), switching off lights for one hour to save energy and visibly demonstrate their desire for a stop to climate change.

Individual Carmelites up and down the country have come up with ways to protect and enhance the natural world, and diminish their 'carbon-footprint' and 'water-footprint'. Why not send in to *Assumpta* examples of how you have made a change for the better to inspire and inform others?

Copenhagen 2009

In December this year, the United Nations will hold a conference in the Danish capital Copenhagen to discuss international efforts to curb carbon emissions. Many environmental and religious groups are hoping that this will be a moment of change throughout the world in favour of protecting the planet. Carmelites will be lobbying (along with CAFOD, Operation Noah and other partners) for a change of policy that will favour the world's poor. More locally, here in Britain Carmelite friars and laity will be taking part in the Operation Noah London Ark Campaign event on 2nd July which has the Copenhagen conference as its focus (see the following advert for more details).

So what can you and your Carmelite community do to promote climate justice?

We've looked at the theory behind why Carmelites should care about climate justice, and considered some examples of how this care has inspired them to action. Let's conclude by considering some actions that you might undertake on your own or as part of your community; the list isn't meant to be prescriptive, but to get you reflecting on practical ways you could make a difference in a way that's appropriate to you.

- Get informed. Learn what you can about the issue of climate justice.
- Pray. Organise a prayer service in your Carmelite community or for your parish using one of the liturgies devised by Operation Noah (www.operationnoah.org) or CAFOD (www.cafod.org.uk).
- Join the Carmelite Family's *Day of Prayer* on the issue of Climate Change on Friday 5th June (the reflection texts are included in this edition of *Assumpta*).
- Reduce, reuse and recycle. Buy products within minimal packaging, recycle whenever you can.
- Save energy (which saves you money and helps save the planet). Reduce your heating and air conditioning, and don't waste hot water. Use energy-saving products (light bulbs, efficient fridges, eco-friendly cars, etc.), and turn off electrical appliances on standby mode.
- Analyse. How do people travel to your Carmelite community meeting and are there ways you could reduce the carbon footprint? Do you meet in a place well served by public transport? If not, what can you or local government do about it?
- Get involved. Support Operation Noah and CAFOD campaigns on climate justice.
- Show solidarity. Twin your community with a Lay Carmelite community in an economically poorer province likely to be effected by climate change.
- Encourage sustainable energy. See if your parish could invest in a small wind turbine now available to buy in some DIY stores.

Websites of interest:

Carmelite NGO at the United Nations: www.carmelitengo.org

United Nations Environment Program: www.unep.org

Catholic Coalition on Climate Change: www.catholicsandclimatechange.org

Ecological Internet: www.ecologicalinternet.org