



Laudato Si

On Care for Our Common Home

As part of our ongoing discussion of Pope Francis' Encyclical, these inserts share conversations with prominent Catholic thinkers. Today's insert is the thoughts of Dr. Carolyn Woo, Executive Director of Catholic Relief Services.

The encyclical emphasizes the power of climate change on the poor. What does Laudato Si' mean for the people who CRS serves?

Woo: I'm going to make four points. The first one is that, as I alluded earlier on, there are three billion people who will suffer the effects of climate change. And "suffer" is the word. And they're the ones who are least responsible for creating this issue because they are too poor to really have the types of habits or industry that would lead to climate change. So for most people, and Catholics in particular, I think that the Pope raises this and it becomes a social justice issue. And we also know this has implications because down the road these countries will need resources in order to address this problem.

The second one I think is brilliant, is how the Pope links our way of living to the poor. And I think in fairly colorful strokes it illustrates the waste that we have, the consumption that we are addicted to, the selfishness in our society and how these different behaviors lead to other people suffering.

The third point is of course we are seeing the effects of these consequences in the people we serve. We are addressing this problem from two dimensions. The first part, which is my point

three, is about mitigation. And so CRS is very active working with Congress. We've visited quite a number of our representatives and our senators on this particular issue, asking what they're doing.

But this is mitigation. We have to reduce the effect of carbon—reduce carbon in our economy. And so this whole area of mitigation, our website has this page specifically to illustrate these stories, educate our constituents so that they could actually see some of this, and again use their vote, use their voice to bring about a low carbon economy.

The fourth thing is really adaptation, and it is very sad to watch, because in Central America for example—and it's not limited to just that region of the world, it's actually around many different regions—but if you look at Central America agriculture, some of the productivity now of the crops are maybe one out of six of what it used to be. Farmers used to be able to count on two rain seasons—a short one and a long one. The short one has gone away, and the long one is completely unpredictable. It's not that there is no rain, it's just that it doesn't come at the time when you have planted your seeds, or when it comes it's a deluge that it washes away the seeds rather than nurtures them.

And so we are seeing Central American farmers really suffering the effects and it renders them so poor. I mean, they were poor to start out with, but here they lose all the other assets and sometimes they have to sell their land. And when they sell their land they become homeless. They go and join the urban poor. We see this whole cycle of what climate change is doing and we're trying to help people adapt by introducing different methods—perhaps different seed, planting different crops, moving from coffee, for example, to chocolate.

So we are going as fast as we know and adopting a lot of innovations along the way to help farmers adapt. Even one or two degree changes could affect them dramatically.

So my point really is, the whole area of mitigation and adaptation are the focuses of CRS work now, but thank the Pope for raising this as a social justice issue because it really is, and also linking us and our behavior to this problem.

These excerpts are from a conversation among Dr. Carolyn Woo, Executive Director of Catholic Relief Services, Fr. James Martin, SJ, and Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski. June 8, 2016

Catholic Relief Services' "Conversations in Climate Change: Laudato Si One Year Later".