

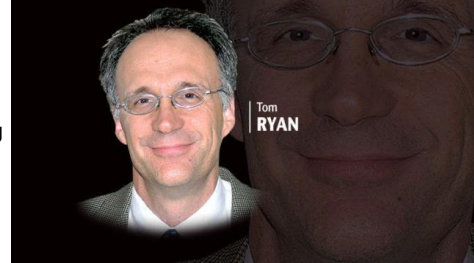
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A Catholic response to disturbing climate report

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Clarion Herald Guest Column by Tom Ryan

To my discredit, I've been something of an armchair environmentalist. I tinker with recycling and composting. Yet, I've lived as if the grim effects of global warming would impact my children's children, not me. I'll be long gone when the worst of it hits.



Except, it looks like I may not be. The United Nations recently released a disturbing report on the threats – coming in the next 20 years – of climate change. Its findings are so dire and its call-to-action so dramatic that readers might be tempted to dismiss them or despair over them. Neither is an option for Catholics who have such powerful resources, theological and spiritual, for responding.

But first the report. Numerous scientists from around the world on the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) base their conclusions on extensive and numerous studies. They argue that it is still possible to keep global temperature within a manageable range, but it will be very difficult.

The U.S. has actually reduced its greenhouse emissions over the last decade while the world's have increased. Yet, the U.S. remains the second-largest emitter (after China) and produces more than twice as much as the third-largest (India).

Should be wary in Louisiana

In south Louisiana, we painfully know the cost of climate change – sea-level rise and stronger hurricanes.

But do we really? Failure to meet IPCC goals would likely result in speedier melting of Arctic permafrost that will release more methane and so compound matters, perhaps drastically. (For a frightening look at this, see <https://goo.gl/aj4FPx>).

Failure will kill coral reefs and lead to droughts and floods that will harm food production, increase migration and hurt the poor and vulnerable most of all.

One temptation is to reject the science. But Catholicism is about truth, no matter its source. Catholicism, like any good scientist, has revised its positions in light of scientific evidence to the contrary. We no longer reject evolution nor locate ourselves at the center of the universe.

Moreover, Catholicism has a long tradition of great scientists – Copernicus, Descartes, Mendel, and on and on. Therefore, Catholics can and should take scientific consensus seriously.

And after Pope Francis's "Laudato Si," we know creation is no peripheral doctrine. But this was the case before Pope Francis. In the Bible's first chapter, God drives home the goodness of each creature before envisioning all creatures together as "very good" (Gen 1:31).

Moreover, we often speak of the Incarnation as God's becoming human. Yet, we, like the rest of the created order, are creatures. So, it's fair to say that God became creature in the Incarnation, and this has salvific implications. As St. Paul suggests, all creation will, in some mysterious way, be redeemed (Rom 8:21-22); we're all in this together.

Finally, Josef Pieper, the great commentator on St. Thomas Aquinas, speaks of creation as the silent center around which the rest of St. Thomas' thought revolves.

Yet, there is more to Catholicism than thought – scientific, biblical or theological. Our faith also supplies us with practices for responding to the dramatic actions urged by the IPCC.

We're good at abstinence. Lenten fasting is, in part, practice at saying "No" when the stakes are lower so that we can do so when they become higher.

And then there's the Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith. The Third Eucharistic Prayer depicts all creation as singing God's praise. The simple fruits of the earth and vine are means of the most intimate encounter with the Incarnate one.

As part of the Sacrament of the Sick, the Eucharist was traditionally called "Viaticum," literally "provision for the journey." This term illuminates the Eucharist as a source of nourishment and strength along the way. Only with such divine support can we make the changes required.

Yet, I won't make a noticeable difference on my own. Yes, Christ works through the Eucharist but also through the church as the people of God. It's only with each other's encouragement and collaboration that we can make the necessary changes.

Yet, even the Church with its billion-plus members isn't enough. Governments at the local, state, national and international levels need to join forces. Here again, Catholicism supplies important resources. While recognizing that bureaucracies can obstruct and conceal, Catholicism also has "A Feeling for Hierarchy," as the late Catholic sociologist Mary Douglas wrote (<https://goo.gl/NsDXdQ>). Catholicism has a cautious optimism that God works even through human structures, such as governments, non-profits, etc.

Catholics today are achingly aware of human finitude. Yet, hope is a key Catholic virtue. St. Thomas could even be read as holding that we are saved by hope, not in ourselves but in God who fortifies us against the dismissiveness or despair that the IPCC report can trigger. This hope enacted in lives and laws can help us make the difficult changes, not only for ourselves but for our children and our children's children.

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