

“The universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all people and every existing thing lies at the very heart of our Franciscan response to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and serves as the foundation for our commitment to live and act for the good of all, including the cosmos. As St. Bonaventure reminds us, every single created thing is a Word of God - everything from human persons to quarks - and to the extent that anything in creation is lost or destroyed or becomes extinct because of human behavior, we become responsible for diminishing God’s revelation! Our commitment to live justly and peacefully with all things demands attention to the reality of Global Warming, which threatens to diminish God’s speech. This statement calls us to be attentive to and to respond to the actual threat of Global Warming both institutionally and personally because this issue touches who we are and how we live as Franciscans!”

- Michael W. Blastic, OFM, Professor, Spirituality Studies, Washington Theological Union

“This Franciscan statement captures the essence of what faces humanity —rapid changes in climate that will be greater than any seen during the past history of organized human society, that is, as long as we have had cities, agriculture, trade, money, language, culture and history. The change in climate is driven by our use of fossil fuels to supplement the energy sources, direct and indirect, that we receive each day from the Sun. That energy supplement has allowed our population to grow beyond the natural carrying capacity of the planet, to the peril of other species, and to us, as we try to steer society to a new, more sustainable, pathway. I believe that various religious organizations can muster grass-roots support that will make a difference. If the communities of faith in America speak out, their voice will equal that of major corporations, and politicians will listen. Indeed, religious organizations are the only groups with the clout in numbers and finances that can equal the powerful corporate forces that foster environmental abuse.”

- William H. Schlesinger, President of Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies.

(Prior to his current position, he was Dean of the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University.)

“Climate change is emerging as a critical global and national security priority. National Security experts have focused on the social dislocations that will be associated with moderate to severe climate change. Outcomes such as the flooding of coastal communities, the increase of drought, and the rise of new disease vectors will lead to displacement of millions of people. As large human communities find themselves displaced, their movement will pose profound challenges to the countries where these people live – and also to the countries to which they will flee. Conflict over increasingly scarce resources may well characterize human communities of the near future if the severe to catastrophic scenarios of climate change do unfold. For these reasons, it is a security imperative for even the most traditional security analyst to consider, not only how nations can respond to climate change, but also how the efforts of nations and of citizens can be directed to reduce the likelihood of the worst climate outcomes. To do so will require the complementary efforts of citizens, of faith-based communities, of governments and of industry. I applaud the Holy Name Province for its willingness to engage the friars and their lay partners in ministry in this very important social justice issue that is likely to have enormous consequences for the national security of the United States.”

- Theresa Sabonis-Helf, Professor of National Security Strategy, National Defense University

A Franciscan Statement on Global Climate Change

A central insight of the Franciscan tradition is that the created world is a window into the divine that reveals God's own beauty. For Francis all of creation was a manifestation of the goodness of God. His Canticle of the Creatures reminds us that all that exists - the sun, moon, stars, water, wind, fire and earth - gives praise to God, and that we humans and the rest of creation are dependent on one another and intimately interconnected.¹ Furthermore, the tradition teaches that human beings find their deepest fulfillment and happiness to the extent that they learn to notice, appreciate and imitate this divine goodness and beauty. God's goodness and beauty is manifested not only in the external, physical beauty of the world around us, but also in the inner beauty of ideals and actions marked by the virtues of compassion, goodness and justice. The Franciscan tradition speaks of human life as a path of beauty – a journey toward personal integrity and a deepening of relationships with other people and all of God's creation.² Along such a path of personal and communal transformation, we encounter challenges. One such challenge is global climate change. Unabated, it can lead to unimaginable suffering and misery for billions of people for centuries to come, and even to a collapse of our planet's life-support system. However, global climate change also can spur humanity to undergo a profound spiritual and social transformation imbued with the values of solidarity, non-violence and inter-generational justice. Confronted by a crisis of great magnitude, we are called to harness the creative powers of the human heart, mind and soul to help create pathways to a more ecologically sustainable, just and beautiful world desired by God. Our Franciscan tradition offers valuable guidance as we travel this path of conversion.

For Francis and his early companions, this journey of conversion was not just a private affair to be carried out on a purely "spiritual" plane. Rather, the Gospel call to conversion had profound social, economic and even ecological dimensions.

The 13th century society in which Francis lived was characterized by a nascent market economy. It was a time of obsessive pursuit of profit and privilege, and appropriation of land and power by the wealthy few at the exclusion of the destitute many, accompanied by pervasive violence. Unfettered greed, the loosening of the fraternal bonds of communion with society, and a sense of entitlement on the part of the wealthy few became a dominant path toward advancement, security and freedom. Within this context, Francis and his followers set out to call individual people and their contemporary society to conversion. They did so by seeking security, freedom and fulfillment in solidarity with the poor and marginalized, and in communion with God and God's creation. Francis' insistence on strict poverty was not ascetical in a narrow sense, but expressive of a fundamental trust in the God of abundance and a manifestation of his radical commitment to live his life in gratitude and in solidarity with the marginalized, and in kinship with all God's creatures.

As followers of St. Francis of Assisi, we are called to do no less than this in our contemporary context. *Embracing the Excluded of Today* – a document from the Franciscan Order's Second International JPIC Congress – puts the challenges this way:

All the Friars and fraternities should awaken to a prophetic sensitivity, which would allow them, not only to recognize the poor and the excluded, but also to identify the processes of

impoverishment and exclusion (causes, agents, victims, mechanisms, means, consequences, etc.), because it is only on the basis of this sensitivity that we can make options coherent with our charism.

Given that the poor, future generations, and countless species of plants and animals will bear the brunt of global climate change, it is imperative that we reflect deeply on this reality and speak and act prophetically.

The following reflection provides a Franciscan perspective on global climate change. It will highlight the grave dangers presented by this crisis and point out unique opportunities for a profound transformation of our society. Mandated by the **HNP JPIC Plan of Action 2011-2012**, this reflection seeks to assist the friars and our lay partners in ministry, especially young adults, in developing a prophetic response to global climate change within the framework of the Franciscan tradition.

In this document, we first will briefly depict the gravity and urgency of global climate change and underscore its impact on the poor and the biodiversity of our planet. Second, we will highlight some of the major factors that hinder efforts to address climate change. Third, we will point to the signs of hope in our church and society. Fourth, we will suggest ways in which Franciscans and Franciscan-hearted people could make a unique contribution in responding to the global climate crisis.

There is overwhelming agreement among the most prestigious scientific bodies in the world that global climate change is real, that it is attributed to human actions, and that the emission of greenhouse gases must be drastically reduced to avert devastating consequences.³ Given the great urgency and the scale of the problem, the international community cannot afford to delay further action to tackle climate change.⁴ Likewise, religious leaders from around the world have sounded the alarm and called attention to the profound moral questions raised by human-induced global climate change.

THE SEVERITY AND URGENCY OF GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE

Global climate change is considered by many to be the key defining issue of the 21st century. Consider the following:

- For 650,000 years, the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere remained below 280 parts per million (PPM).⁵ This began to change with the Industrial Revolution, when the burning of fossil fuels to produce energy and goods started to progressively alter the chemical composition of the atmosphere. The concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere has now reached 392 PPM. If public policy does not change and we remain on the current trajectory for greenhouse gas emissions, the median projection for the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ is expected to reach 866 PPM by the year 2095.⁶ To preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth is adapted, the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere ought to be reduced to a safe level of 350 PPM.⁷ This means that the emissions of conventional fossil fuel should be rapidly phased down, and unconventional fossil fuels, such as the tar sands, should be left in the ground.
- Over the last 100 years, the Earth's climate has warmed by about 1°C (1.8°F). The geological record shows that about 3 million years ago, when the Earth was 2-3 °C

warmer than it is now, the sea level was 25-35 meters higher.⁸ At the current rate of greenhouse gas emissions, by the end of this century we are slated to increase the average global temperature by 6 °C or more.⁹

- Sea ice loss in the Arctic is happening faster than every major climate model projected. Likewise, massive Greenland and West Antarctic ice sheets are melting at accelerating rates. One of the most recent estimates puts the likely sea level rise within the next 90 years at up to six feet.¹⁰ It is important to realize that about 100 million people live within about three feet of sea level, the majority of them in the river deltas of Asia and Africa. Furthermore, if completely melted, the Antarctic ice sheet would raise the global sea level by 52.8 meters, while Greenland's would add an additional 6.6 meters.¹¹
- Scientists have determined that the rise in the global average temperature must be kept to 2°C to avoid the risk of transgressing critical tipping points beyond which humanity would face irreversible and devastating changes. Some of the expected environmental consequences include: intensification of the extreme weather events, desertification of one third the planet and drought over half of the planet by 2100, and progressive ocean acidification.
- Since the Industrial Revolution, the oceans have absorbed huge quantities of our greenhouse gas emissions, leading to their acidification. Evidence suggests that already the sea is 30% more acidic than it was 200 years ago. This acidity makes the water less friendly for corals and shellfish. If the current emission rate continues, we will likely reach an acidification level unprecedented in the last 300 million years.¹² An estimated 252 million years ago, when the ocean reached high levels of acidification, the rate of CO₂ released into the atmosphere that drove the dangerous climate change back then was 10-100 times slower than that of current emissions, but even so resulted in the extinction of around 96% of all marine species.¹³
- If the global average temperature were to increase up to 3°C during the 21st century, up to 60% of existing species could face extinction.¹⁴
- The perennially frozen ground that underlies nearly a quarter of the Northern Hemisphere contains a staggering amount of carbon. These frozen sediments have four times more carbon than what has been emitted by human activity in modern times, and twice as much as is present in the atmosphere today. Billions of tons of carbon trapped in high-latitude permafrost could be released into the atmosphere by the end of this century as the Earth's climate changes, further accelerating global warming, according to a new computer modeling study.¹⁵ This process has already begun.
- The glaciers in North and South America and in the Himalayan-Tibetan plateau also are quickly retreating, jeopardizing the precious water resources for millions of people and endangering their food security.¹⁶ Smaller glaciers located far from the North and South poles are the ones most rapidly receding. The glaciers of Northern Afghanistan, for example, have lost 60% of their area just since 1992.
- The Amazon rainforest is being impacted by global climate change. In the last five years, this tropical region has experienced two “droughts of the century.” The ongoing deforestation, exacerbated by global climate change, now threatens to destroy the lungs of our planet. It is estimated that over the next few decades, Amazonia could reach a

tipping point resulting in the dieback of up to 80% of the rainforest, and its being replaced by savannah.¹⁷

THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE ESPECIALLY ON THE POOR AND THE BIODIVERSITY OF OUR PLANET

Climate change and poverty are intricately connected. Increased droughts, rising temperatures, more erratic rainfall, flooding, and disease will disproportionately affect those living in dire poverty, especially in impoverished and developing nations, and will increase global inequity. In poor communities and countries, people are compelled to live on hillsides, in spite of the imminent danger of landslides, and on coastal lands that are at high risk of being inundated by rising water. Likewise, they do not have insurance when they lose a crop to drought or a home to flooding. After a flood, they cannot easily access clean water, or medicine to fight flood-related disease. In addition, as many as 1.8 billion people could be living in a water-scarce environment by 2080.¹⁸ Africa alone has a total of more than 650 million people dependent on rain-fed agriculture who live in environments already affected by water scarcity and land degradation. If this trend is accelerated by climate change, two-thirds of the region's arable land could be lost by 2025 and, with it, the livelihoods of millions of smallholder farmers.¹⁹ By 2020, it is expected that climate change will cause grassland productivity to decline by 40–90% in semi-arid and arid regions.²⁰ Latin America and South Asia also will experience losses in agricultural production. With increased drought, rising temperatures, and more erratic rainfall, the UN Development Program predicts that as many as 600 million more people will face malnutrition by 2080.²¹ It is the rich and high-consuming peoples of the world that exacerbate the problem of climate change. The poor and most vulnerable people who bear no responsibility for global climate change will bear the brunt of it with no resources to mitigate and adapt to the anticipated alteration of their environment.

The expected impact of global climate change on food security in the U.S. also should be of concern. According to the seminal study from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, if atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations increase to a peak of 450-600 PPM over this century, there is a high risk that the American West could be turned into a permanent dust bowl.²² Moreover, even if the CO₂ level is stabilized at around 560 PPM, “corn and soy yields are predicated to decrease by 30-46% before the end of the century. On the highest and most rapid warming scenario, by the end of the century, corn and soy yields are predicted to decrease by 63-82%.”²³

The number of humanitarian disasters recorded over a 20-year period has increased from around 200 to more than 400 over the past two decades, and seven out of every ten disasters are now climate-related.²⁴ If we don't take advantage of the small window of opportunity to drastically curb the emission of greenhouse gases, then extreme weather events, widespread food insecurities, famines, lack of access to clean water, and refugee problems could foreseeably overwhelm the capacity of nations to cope with such problems. Inaction would also raise the specter of failed states, wars and enormous national security challenges.²⁵ Increasingly, global climate change is being recognized as one of the most serious threats to national security that our country and the world face.

WHAT HINDERS EFFORTS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE JUSTICE

What hinders our efforts to constructively address the global climate crisis is a tendency to reduce the complex issues around climate change crisis to a single dimension. A prophetic

sensitivity, however, compels us to engage the issue of climate crisis from several distinct perspectives: environmental/scientific; spiritual/theological; psychological/sociological; and economic/political.

The first obstacle stems from an insufficient level of environmental literacy among faith communities and the public in general. This inadequacy makes us susceptible to the deceptive claims of climate deniers and to those who use opposition to the basic science of climate change as part of their political platform.

The second impediment is more spiritual and theological in nature. The creation care theology that has surfaced in the last decade is only beginning to affect local faith communities. People of faith are just starting to recognize the profound spiritual and moral questions associated with global climate change.

In this same vein, another factor that impacts our response to global climate change is that the individual and social sins of greed and overconsumption often go unrecognized. Climate change is about international and inter-generational equity: we must make room in our hearts and in our thinking for the Franciscan virtue of living more modestly. As a society we are quick to dismiss the idea of climate change, because the problem itself suggests that there is something wrong with how we live on the Earth.

A third key component is psychological in nature. As Richard W. Miller states:

When faced with the overwhelming character of these [climate change] forecasts, we develop coping mechanisms that shield us from the real gravity of our situation. This is understandable, and to some extent we are all to a certain degree susceptible to this, since a real acceptance of the science requires one to fundamentally revise one's understanding of the world and one's responsibilities to it. That is not easy to do.²⁶

The fourth element that hinders our response to global climate change is a failure to name and deal with powerful political and economic forces that stand in the way of solutions to global climate crisis. Consider the following:

- In 2008, American consumers and businesses spent \$1 trillion on fossil fuels, more than the nation spent on education or the military. More than 70 percent of this money is spent on oil. For every dollar that an American household spends each year, about 10 cents is likely to go toward the purchase of fossil fuel.²⁷
- The five largest oil companies - BP, Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Royal Dutch Shell - made a record-high \$137 billion in profits in 2011 - up 75 percent from 2010 - and made more than \$1 trillion in profits from 2001 through 2011.²⁸ The enormous profits made by dirty fossil fuel industries has enabled them to use their power to ensure that they continue to receive federal subsidies to the tune of \$4 billion a year and maintain a stranglehold on government energy policies.
- Close to 3,000 lobbyists are paid to influence U.S. members of Congress on issues related to climate change and energy: 140 of them advocate for alternative energy while about 2,850 lobbyists represent fossil fuel industries. Individuals and political action committees affiliated with oil and gas companies have donated \$238.7 million to candidates and parties since the 1990 election cycle, 75 percent of which has gone to the

members of one political party.²⁹ In 2011, the oil and gas industries spent \$146 million lobbying Congress.³⁰

- Many companies that make profits from petroleum, coal or gas, including Southern, Peabody, ExxonMobil, and the Koch brothers, have spent hundreds of millions of dollars over the last decades funding questionable studies that dispute the overwhelming scientific consensus around the issue of global warming, thus confusing the public. These companies have made significant financial contributions to many politicians running for re-elections and played a major role in derailing climate legislation.³¹

SIGNS OF HOPE IN SOCIETY AND IN THE CHURCH

At this critical crossroads in the history of humankind, we need to not just comprehend the gravity and urgency of global climate change, but help people overcome the psychological barriers to taking action as mentioned earlier. Instilling fear has not been effective in causing such a psychological shift. Instilling a sense of hope could prove much more effective in causing that shift. It is important for us to look to the future with hope and recognize emerging possibilities for the profound transformations of our hearts and minds, our society, and its institutions. The Franciscan tradition emphasizes that all creation and history ultimately lean toward goodness and beauty. Drawn by the Holy Spirit toward that future, we are called to name and act on the signs of hope around us. These include the following:

- People of diverse faiths are going back and retrieving their ancient traditions that recognize and celebrate both the physical and spiritual dimensions of God's creation and that challenge us to extend the circles of compassion, justice and solidarity to include all God's creatures and ecosystems, including future generations of all creation. Likewise, communities of faith increasingly are starting to integrate care for creation and environmental justice issues into their teaching, preaching and advocacy outreach.
- There is a steady growth of various inter-faith initiatives and partnerships at local and national levels that promote environmental justice and climate solutions.
- There is mounting evidence that a new paradigm is emerging in our society. A green revolution is on the rise. There is a potential for merging Internet technology and renewable energy to create what is described as a "Third Industrial Revolution."³² At the same time, there are signs that we might be on the cusp of a spiritual revolution: we are beginning to re-discover that we are part of God's creation, that we belong here, that we are profoundly interconnected with the larger body of life in its beauty and its staggering diversity.
- The steady growth of renewable energy and the constantly improving technologies offer a compelling sign that the era of the old, dirty fossil fuel industry might be slowly coming to an end. Solar and wind installations are doubling every two years and are poised to follow the same trajectory as personal computers and Internet use over the next two decades.
- A 2007 study in *Scientific American* indicates that the southwest region of the U.S. could provide 69% of U.S. electricity and 35% of the country's total energy needs by 2050.³³ A Stanford University study of global wind capacity estimates that harnessing 20% of the available wind on the planet would provide seven times more electricity than the world

uses now.³⁴ Furthermore, in the U.S., the geothermal energy within two miles of the Earth's surface could provide for America's needs for 30,000 years.³⁵

- According to research done by the Rockefeller Foundation, upgrading and replacing energy-consuming equipment in buildings could make a huge impact. Buildings consume approximately half of all energy used in the United States. Increased building retrofits could reduce energy consumption in buildings by up to 30%, creating more than 3.3 million jobs in the United States economy and yielding more than \$1 trillion of energy savings over 10 years.³⁶
- There is a growing realization that strong public policy that tackles global climate change is good for the environment, good for people's health, and good for the economy and job growth. Catholics and Evangelical Christians have been working to phase out the use of the dirty fossil fuels and put an end to the release of cancer-causing chemicals. Expanding their pro-life agenda, they have come to see that a sound public policy curbing the emission of greenhouse gases would prevent millions of cases of cancer and other diseases, and stave off countless pre-mature deaths. Furthermore, despite the propaganda war waged by the some of the fossil fuel industries, diverse segments of our society have recognized the deceptiveness of claims that suggest delaying action on climate change is supposedly necessary to strengthen the economy and spur job growth. According to the International Energy Agency, for every \$1 of investment avoided in the power sector before 2020, an additional \$4.3 would need to be spent after 2020 to compensate for the increased emissions.³⁷
- Likewise, more and more people are beginning to comprehend that the services of ecological systems and the natural capital stocks that produce them are critical to the functioning of a healthy economy; in essence, that there is an economic value to nature and to preserving nature's ability to perform its traditional functions. It is estimated that the current economic value of the entire biosphere (most of which is outside the conventional market) is in the range of US\$16–54 trillion, with the global gross national product total being around US\$18 trillion per year.³⁸
- There is a growing realization that a \$5 trillion global clean energy market is emerging. At the present moment, China and Germany are its top competitors with the U.S. lagging much further behind. However, harnessing the ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit of the American people could help pull our country out of the deadly grip of the fossil fuel industry and strengthen our democracy.
- Social movements involving youth, such as 350.org and the Energy Action Coalition's Power Shift, have been able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of young people around the world, harnessing their idealism and creativity, and igniting their passion for climate justice. It is a great sign of hope to see them involved in grassroots community actions, using the power of social media to affect change.
- Dealing with global climate change has become one of the JPIC priorities of Holy Name Province (HNP). An increasing number of HNP ministries are getting involved in care for creation efforts at the local level, working to reduce their carbon footprint, and integrating concerns for environmental justice into their preaching and teaching.

- Recently, the Franciscan Order has launched the Amazon Project, which includes a strong commitment to preserving the rich biodiversity of that region, and supports the indigenous people whose traditional cultures, wisdom and way of life are being wiped out.

WHAT IS OURS TO DO?

Eight centuries ago, a young man from Assisi was praying in the dilapidated church of Saint Damiano when he heard a voice speaking to him from the crucifix: “Francis, rebuild my house that is falling into ruin.” He could have gone to a monastery and spent the rest of his life meditating on the meaning of Christ’s words. But Francis responded by getting up, rolling up his sleeves and picking up stones to repair the church. Others soon joined him, touched by his idealism and his ability to express his passion through concrete actions. In the later part of his life, Francis came to understand that his mission was to restore the space that God created and intended for human flourishing – nature, mother, sister Earth, all creation, the divine milieu he celebrated in his Cantic of the Creatures.

As we reflect on the signs of the times, we may realize that the edifice of the dominant worldview is beginning to crumble. It is a worldview in which human beings have seen themselves as separated from the rest of God’s creation and free to pursue the dream of unlimited material growth and consumption. In its place, the edifice of a new, alternative vision is beginning to emerge. This edifice of a new global civilization of love is marked by values of solidarity, sustainability, and justice, and a profound respect for life that extends to all of creation. Working together with people of good will, we as Franciscans can make a unique contribution toward rebuilding God’s house so that the world comes to reveal more fully the glory and beauty of God. As Holy Name Province, we reiterate our commitment to act on the JPIC Action Plan 2011-2012, especially as it relates to our care for creation. In particular, we strongly support collaborative efforts with our lay partners in ministry, especially youth and young-adults, on climate justice issues.

Taking seriously our Franciscan legacy of helping the larger Church grow more faithful to the Gospel and Christ’s mission, we seek to strengthen our commitment to reach out to her leaders at various levels of its hierarchy and hold up the moral and spiritual dimensions of global climate change.

In the spirit of Assisi, we recognize the great need to deal with the issue of global climate change as part of larger, inter-faith coalitions at local and national levels, exemplified by the Inter-Faith Power and Light chapters active in many geographic areas of the country. Furthermore, we urge support for local and national grassroots organizations and those initiatives that move us toward environmental and inter-generational justice, renewable sources of energy, a clean and healthy environment, green jobs, and a vibrant economy.

Retrieving and acting upon our long tradition of caring for the powerless and for our mother, sister Earth is a great gift that we as Franciscans can offer our society and our Church. This is the time to act with creativity, passion and courage, trusting that God will use us to discover new pathways to a more vibrant, beautiful future. Eight hundred years ago, St. Francis of Assisi and his followers chose to be troubadours of hope and leaven of transformation in a society that had forgotten what it meant to be human. May God give us the necessary passion, creativity and audacity to become, in the words of the former Minister General of the Franciscan Order Fr. Giacomo Bini, “*living parables of the Kingdom of God,*” and do what is ours to do.

(This document has been prepared by Jacek Orzechowski, OFM and approved by the Provincial Council of the Holy Name Province.)

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- ²⁹ Figures drawn from the following page of The Center for Responsive Politics' OpenSecrets.org website:
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