Climate Change: Our Church Has Something to Say
By Joan Weber

Purpose
As people of faith, Catholics believe the issue of climate change is not just about politics, economics, or interest groups, but it is primarily about the protection of God’s creation. Climate change is a moral issue for people of faith because it makes the lives of poor people more vulnerable. Our faith calls us to act and advocate for the “least” among us. This 90-minute session introduces youth to the Catholic response to climate change and to highlight how the global issue especially impacts the lives of those who are already struggling with poverty.

Session at a Glance
7:00 pm Welcome / What Does Faith Have to Do with It?
7:05 pm Opening Prayer: God Saw That It Was Good
7:10 pm Jeopardy: Catholics and Climate
7:30 pm Exploring Church Teaching
8:00 pm Teaching Church Teaching
8:20 pm Closing Prayer: Care for All of God’s Creation
8:30 pm Good Night!

Extend the Session Ideas
1. Bring in a speaker from the diocese or a faith-based organization to go deeper into Church teaching with the young people (or see if a Catholic Climate Ambassador lives near you or is available: http://catholicclimatecovenant.org/about-us/catholic-climate-ambassadors/).
2. Send your young people on a mission to interview people in their parish or Catholic high school on the following questions, then report back to the large group what they discover:
   a. Would you describe our (parish/school) as environmentally friendly?
   b. What are we, as an institution/faith community, doing to care for God’s creation?
   c. How are we sharing the teaching of the Church about care for God’s creation with our parishioners/students?

Materials Needed
- Prayer table with Bible (opened to Psalm 19:1-6), globe, cross, pillar candle, and matches or lightstick
- Laptop computer, LCD projector, and screen or blank wall if using a PowerPoint presentation
• **Resource 1, Opening Prayer**, seven copies for the readers
• **Handout 1, Catholic Principles on Climate Change**, copy-doubled, enough for one-sixth of the participants
• **Handout 2, Vatican Messages on Climate Change**, copy-doubled, enough for one-sixth of the participants
• **Handout 3, U.S. Bishops’ Messages on Climate Change**, enough for one-sixth of the participants
• **Handout 4, Renewing the Earth—An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching**, enough for one-sixth of the participants
• **Handout 5, Ten Commandments for the Environment**, copy-doubled, enough for one-sixth of the participants
• **Handout 6, The Catechism and the Environment**, copy-doubled, enough for one-sixth of the participants
• Supplies for the activity: flip camera(s), MP3 player, newsprint, markers, scissors, tape, glue, colored construction paper, yarn, etc., laptop computer

**Prepare in Advance**
1. Invite eight youth to proclaim Scripture for the opening prayer, and give them a copy of **Resource 1, Opening Prayer: God Saw It Was Good**. Have them ready to take their places around the outskirts of the group, “surrounding” those who gather.

2. Choose slides and create a PowerPoint presentation for the opening prayer which includes pictures of creation in the order in which they are proclaimed in Genesis 1.

3. Have your supply table in a readily accessible place in the room.

4. Set up tables for refreshments and sign-in. Have one or two people at the sign-in table with a check-in sheet and name tags. **Hospitality is important**: As the leader, do not use the gathering time before the session begins to take care of last minute preparations. Spend the time moving among the participants, greeting and speaking with them.

**Session Outline**

**Welcome** (5 minutes)
Greet the young people and invite them to be seated. Explain that you are going to do a “Stand If” activity with them. You will read several statements, and they are to stand for each of the statements which fits them. The statements are:
1. Stand if you got enough sleep last night.
2. Stand if you would eat chocolate cake for breakfast.
3. Stand if you love homework.
4. Stand if you care about the environment.
5. Stand if you share responsibility for harmful climate changes.
6. Stand if you think being Catholic affects how you treat the earth.
7. Stand if you think hurting creation is a sin.

Continue with the following, using these or your own words:

Tonight we are going to look at the reality of climate change through the lens of our Catholic faith. Sometimes we separate science and faith, yet Jesus challenges us to look at everything happening in our world—and our part in it—through his eyes. As disciples, we are called to care for God’s creation and take responsibility to protect our environment.

Let’s begin by praying with the first chapter of Genesis—the account of God creating the earth.

**Opening Prayer: God Saw That It Was Good** (5 minutes)
Invite the adolescents who are proclaiming Scripture to take their places. Dim the lights. Invite the participants to be part of the proclamation of the Word by responding to each reader with: “And God saw that it was good.”

**Gather**
Prayer Leader: *(begin with the Sign of the Cross)*

Creator God,
We come to you with gratitude for this beautiful world which you have shared with us. Help us to be good stewards of the resources of the earth. Help us to respect the earth as a gift from you to be cherished, not exploited. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus and in your Spirit. Amen.

**Listen**
*Note to Leader:* If you created a PowerPoint presentation to accompany the prayer, advance the slides as the readers proclaim the Word.

Reader 1:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light.

All: And God saw that it was good.

Reader 2:

Then God said, “Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other.”

All: And God saw that it was good.
Reader 3:

Then God said, "Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear."

All: And God saw that it was good.

Reader 4:

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it."

All: And God saw that it was good.

Reader 5:

Then God said, "Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky."

All: And God saw that it was good.

Reader 6:

Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth all kinds of living creatures: cattle, creeping things, and wild animals of all kinds."

All: And God saw that it was good.

Reader 7:

Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth."

All: And God saw that it was good.

Reader 8:

Thus the heavens and the earth and all their array were completed. Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation.

All: And God saw that it was good.

Send Forth

Prayer Leader:

Creator God, you fashioned all of nature and declared it good. Help us to appreciate the world which you made holy, and to be good stewards of our earth. Open our hearts today (tonight) to learn what our Catholic faith calls us to do to cultivate and care for creation. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus, and in your Spirit.

Amen.
Jeopardy: Catholics and Climate (20 minutes)
Introduce the Jeopardy game with the following:

Before we explore what our Catholic faith has to say about climate change, let’s see how much you already know. We’re going to play Catholics and Climate Jeopardy.

Divide the group into teams of five or six. Tell them that they are going to play as a team. When you give the answer to a question, they are to confer and when they agree on the question, one of the team members should stand. Whichever team stands first gets to offer their question. If they get it wrong, the second team to stand gets to try. Take about 15 minutes to play the game. Keep track of points, and announce the winning team at the end of the game.

Exploring Church Teaching (30 minutes)
Introduce the instructions for small group work by saying:

Our planet is experiencing changes which are harmful to the earth and to present and future generations. Yet since the very first book of the Bible was written, we have been taught that God wants us to care for the earth. Today our Church has named care for God’s creation as one of the seven basic principles of our social teaching. Church leaders have pointed out that it’s not just an issue of damaging the earth. The poor are particularly vulnerable to the climate changes caused by abuse of the environment.

In this session, we are going to examine some of the recent statements of our Church which can guide us in making good choices in how we live on this planet. Each small group will receive excerpts from a particular Church document or Church leader. Your job is to read your excerpts and then share what strikes each of you the most. Then discuss what one teaching or concept you think teenagers of today need to know.

Once you have chosen your one idea, find a way to teach this concept to your peers. You can do an activity, create a Flip video, do a skit or song, create a Facebook posting, or anything else which would help to get the message out.

You will have about 25 minutes to read your quotes and create your plan. Try to make your presentation/activity no longer than three to three and a half minutes. Let me know if you have any questions during this time. And feel free to use any items on the supply table for your work.

We will share your ideas with each other when we finish.

Divide the large group into six smaller groups. Give each group one of the resource sheets with quotes from Church leadership (Handouts 2-7).

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Give the groups time to do their work. Circulate around the room in case any groups have questions or seem stuck. Give a time check when there are ten minutes left, and again when there are five minutes left.

**Teaching Church Teaching** (20 minutes)
Invite participants back into the large group. Invite each of the six groups to present its work to the other groups. Allow for feedback if time permits.

Conclude this activity with the following:

- Thank you for sharing! Knowing that our Church offers us guidelines and principles for making decisions about how we treat creation can help us make good and holy decisions.

- Let’s take our insights to prayer.

**Closing Prayer: Care for All of God’s Creation** (10 minutes)

*Gather*

Prayer Leader: *(begin with the Sign of the Cross)*

Creator God, we are so grateful to you for creation, for all of the things which you have trusted to our care. Send us forth to listen more attentively to our Church as we strive to be better stewards of the earth. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

*Listen*

Invite the reader to proclaim Psalm 19:1-6. Allow a few moments of silence after the reading.

*Respond*

Prayer Leader:

Let’s respond to the Good News of the glory of God’s creation. Our response will be: **God’s creation is one, and it is good.**

We pray for the wisdom to stop doing those things which cause climate change. **God’s creation is one, and it is good.**

We pray for the courage to challenge each other to be good stewards of creation. **God’s creation is one, and it is good.**

We pray for the holiness to see the hand of God in all of nature. **God’s creation is one, and it is good.**
Send Forth
Prayer Leader:

Loving God, help us to always remember what Pope Benedict has said—that your creation is one and it is good. Amen.

Thank the young people for their participation in tonight’s session.

Joan Weber has been a fulltime staff member of the Center for Ministry Development’s Certificate since 1995. She teaches the Justice and Service Course in the Youth Ministry Certificate Program, and is a Coordinator for Young Neighbors in Action, CMD’s service-learning experience for teens.
Resource 1

Opening Prayer: God Saw It Was Good

Gather
Prayer Leader: Creator God, we come to you with gratitude for this beautiful world which you have shared with us. Help us to be good stewards of the resources of the earth. Help us to respect the earth as a gift from you to be cherished, not exploited. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus and in your Spirit. Amen.

Gather
Prayer Leader: (begin with the Sign of the Cross)

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Listen
Reader 1:

After each reading, please respond with “And God saw that it was good.”

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Then God said, ”Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky.”
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Then God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth."
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Reader 8:  
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Send Forth
Prayer Leader:  
Creator God, you fashioned all of nature and declared it good. Help us to appreciate the world which you made holy, and to be good stewards of our earth. Open our hearts today (tonight) to learn what our Catholic faith calls us to do to cultivate and care for creation. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus, and in your Spirit. Amen.
Catholic Principles on Climate Change

Catholic teaching on climate change embraces the principles of prudence, poverty, and the common good. These three principles form the foundation of the work of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change.

1. Prudence

“Prudence is intelligence applied to our actions … a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned basis for taking or avoiding action to achieve a moral good.”

— U.S. Bishops

The Coalition accepts overwhelming scientific consensus about climate change. There is nearly unanimous agreement that human actions are creating a warming planet. As stewards of all creation, we must identify wise, careful actions that will reverse this climate change and avoid its potentially dangerous impact on all life—especially human life.

State and local Catholic leaders can play a central role in bringing together scientists, theologians, business and labor leaders, government officials, human service providers and other stakeholders to shape a wise and careful approach consistent with our principles. With such leadership, the Catholic community will answer God’s call to be faithful stewards.

2. Poverty

“… any successful strategy must also reflect the genuine participation and concerns of those most affected and least able to bear the burdens … [this] is a moral and political necessity …”

— U.S. Bishops

Natural disasters take the greatest toll on poor people. Inadequate transportation, lack of insurance, poor housing, and little if any cash reserves put them on the edge of the precipice. To survive severe storms, prolonged droughts, extended heat waves and other climate-related events, these vulnerable sisters and brothers must receive assistance—both public and private.

The Coalition seeks to find constructive ways to approach climate change from the bottom up. We strive to bring the voice of the poor to the public debate about climate change and ensure that resources are available to the most vulnerable.

3. The Common Good

“Responses to global climate change should reflect our interdependence and common responsibility for the future of our planet. Individual nations must measure their own self-interest against the greater common good and contribute equitably to global solutions.”
—U.S. Bishops

Climate change provides an opportunity to act with courage and creativity as individuals, as people of faith, as a nation. As a wealthy nation and as the top contributor to greenhouse gases, we in the United States must help to shape responses that serve not only our own interests but those the of the entire human family. The Coalition assists the Catholic community in linking personal stewardship and care for creation with our moral responsibilities to practice solidarity.

Source: www.catholicsandclimatechange.org/church_teaching/index.html
Vatican Messages on Climate Change

“At a time of world food shortage, of financial turmoil, of old and new forms of poverty, of disturbing climate change, of violence and deprivation which force many to leave their homelands in search of a less precarious form of existence, of the ever-present threat of terrorism, of growing fears over the future, it is urgent to rediscover grounds for hope. Let no one draw back from this peaceful battle that has been launched by Christ’s Resurrection. For as I said earlier, Christ is looking for men and women who will help him to affirm his victory using his own weapons: the weapons of justice and truth, mercy, forgiveness and love.”

—Pope Benedict XVI, Urbi et Orbi, Easter 2009

“The brutal consumption of creation begins where God is not, where matter is henceforth only material for us, where we ourselves are the ultimate demand, where the whole is merely our property and we consume it for ourselves alone … I think, therefore, that true and effective initiatives to prevent the waste and destruction of creation can be implemented and developed, understood and lived, only where creation is considered as beginning with God.”

—Pope Benedict XVI, August 2008

“… make the responsibilities visible so that we may respond to this great challenge: to rediscover the Face of the Creator in Creation, to rediscover in the Creator's presence our responsibilities for his Creation, which he has entrusted to us, to form the ethical capacity for a lifestyle that we must adopt if we wish to tackle the problems of this situation [of climate change] and if we really want to reach positive solutions.

“Do not be fooled by those who see you as just another consumer in a market of undifferentiated possibilities, where choice itself becomes the good, novelty usurps beauty, and subjective experience displaces truth…

“My dear friends, God’s creation is one and it is good. The concerns for non-violence, sustainable development, justice and peace, and care for our environment are of vital importance for humanity.”

—Pope Benedict XVI at World Youth Day, June 2008

“Prudence does not mean failing to accept responsibilities and postponing decisions; it means being committed to making joint decisions after pondering responsibly the road to be taken, decisions aimed at strengthening that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.
"If the protection of the environment involves costs, they should be justly distributed, taking due account of the different levels of development of various countries and the need for solidarity with future generations."

U.S. Bishops’ Messages on Climate Change

Bishops’ Statement on Climate Change (2001)
Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good

“As people of faith, we are convinced that "the earth is the Lord's and all it holds." (Ps 24:1) Our Creator has given us the gift of creation: the air we breathe, the water that sustains life, the fruits of the land that nourish us, and the entire web of life without which human life cannot flourish. All of this God created and found "very good." We believe our response to global climate change should be a sign of our respect for God's creation.”

“At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family.”

“The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing climate change. This virtue is not only a necessary one for individuals in leading morally good lives, but is also vital to the moral health of the larger community. Prudence is intelligence applied to our actions. It allows us to discern what constitutes the common good in a given situation. Prudence requires a deliberate and reflective process that aids in the shaping of the community's conscience. Prudence not only helps us identify the principles at stake in a given issue, but also moves us to adopt courses of action to protect the common good. Prudence is not, as popularly thought, simply a cautious and safe approach to decisions. Rather, it is a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned basis for taking or avoiding action to achieve a moral good.”

“Now we face two central moral questions:

1. How are we to fulfill God's call to be stewards of creation in an age when we may have the capacity to alter that creation significantly, and perhaps irrevocably?
2. How can we as a “family of nations” exercise stewardship in a way that respects and protects the integrity of God's creation and provides for the common good, as well as for economic and social progress based on justice?”

“Responses to global climate change should reflect our interdependence and common responsibility for the future of our planet. Individual nations must measure their own self-interest against the greater common good and contribute equitably to global solutions.”

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Handout 4

Renewing the Earth—
An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in
Light of Catholic Social Teaching

U.S. Bishops' Statement from 1991
“Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human. Our tradition calls us to protect the life and dignity of the human person, and it is increasingly clear that this task cannot be separated from the care and defense of all of creation.”

“It is to the Creator of the universe, then, that we are accountable for what we do or fail to do to preserve and care for the earth and all its creatures.”

“By preserving natural environments, by protecting endangered species, by laboring to make human environments compatible with local ecology, by employing appropriate technology, and by carefully evaluating technological innovations as we adopt them, we exhibit respect for creation and reverence for the Creator.”

“Created things belong not to the few, but to the entire human family.”

“As individuals, as institutions, as a people, we need a change of heart to preserve and protect the planet for our children and for generations yet unborn.”

“The whole human race suffers as a result of environmental blight, and generations yet unborn will bear the price for our failure to act today.”
Ten Commandments for the Environment

Woodeene Koenig-Bricker’s book on Pope Benedict XVI speaking out for creation and justice

“The Bible lays out the fundamental moral principles of how to confront the ecological question. The human person, made in God’s image, is superior to all other earthly creatures, which should in turn be used responsibly. Christ’s Incarnation and His teachings testify to the value of nature: Nothing that exists in this world is outside the divine plan of Creation and Redemption.” (p. 27)

“The social teaching of the Church recalls two fundamental points. We should not reduce nature to a mere instrument to be manipulated and exploited. Nor should we make nature an absolute value, or put it above the dignity of the human person.” (p. 41)

“The question of the environment entails the whole planet, as it is a collective good. Our responsibility toward ecology extends to future generations.” (p. 51)

“It is necessary to confirm both the primacy of ethics and the rights of man over technology, thus preserving human dignity. The central point of reference for all scientific and technical applications must be respect for the human person, who in turn should treat the other created beings with respect.” (p. 65)

“Nature must not be regarded as a reality that is divine in itself, removed from human action. It is, rather, a gift offered by our Creator to the human community, given to human intelligence and moral responsibility. It follows, then, that it is not illicit to modify the ecosystem, so long as this is done within the context of a respect for its own order and beauty, and taking into consideration the utility of every creature.” (p. 77)

“Ecological questions highlight the need to achieve a greater harmony both between measures designed to promote economic development and those directed to preserving the ecology, and between national and international policies. Economic development, moreover, needs to take into consideration the integrity and rhythm of nature, because natural resources are limited. And all economic activity that uses natural resources should also include the costs of safeguarding the environment into the calculations of the overall costs of its activity.” (p. 89)

“Concern for the environment means that we should actively work for the integral development of the poorest regions. The goods of this world have been created by God to be wisely used by all. These goods should be shared, in a just and charitable
manner. The principle of the universal destiny of goods offers a fundamental orientation to deal with the complex relationship between ecology and poverty.” (p. 101) “Collaboration, by means of world-wide agreements, backed up by international law, is necessary to protect the environment. Responsibility toward the environment needs to be implemented in an adequate way at the juridical level. These laws and agreements should be guided by the demands of the common good.” (p. 115)

“Lifestyles should be oriented according to the principles of sobriety, temperance, and self-discipline, both at the personal and social levels. People need to escape from the consumer mentality and promote methods of production that respect the created order, as well as satisfying the basic needs of all. This change of lifestyle would be helped by a greater awareness of the interdependence that ties together all the inhabitants of the earth.” (p. 125)

“A spiritual response must be given to environmental questions, inspired by the conviction that creation is a gift that God has placed in the hands of mankind, to be used responsibly and with loving care. People’s fundamental orientation toward the created world should be one of gratitude and thankfulness. The world, in fact, leads people back to the mystery of God who has created it and continues to sustain it. If God is forgotten, nature is emptied of its deepest meaning and left impoverished.” (p. 135)
Handout 6

The Catechism and the Environment

“Our Creed begins with the creation of heaven and earth, for creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God’s work.” (198)

“Creation is the foundation of ‘all God’s saving plans,’ the ‘beginning of the history of salvation’ that culminates in Christ.” (280)

“Creation is the common work of the Holy Trinity.” (292)

“The world was made for the glory of God. St. Bonaventure explains that God created all things ‘not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it’.” (293)

“Because creation comes forth from God’s goodness, it shares in that goodness—‘And God saw that it was good…very good’.” (299)

“Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives.” (2415)

“There is a solidarity among all creatures arising from the fact that all have the same Creator and are all ordered to his glory.” (344)

“God speaks to man through the visible creation. The material cosmos is so presented to man’s intelligence that he can read there traces of its Creator (cf. Wisdom 13:1; Romans 1:19f; Acts 14:17). Light and darkness, wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both his greatness and his nearness.” (1147)

“Those responsible for business enterprises are responsible to society for the economic and ecological effects of their operations.” (2432)

“In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself. The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence.” (2404)

“Those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation, reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor.” (2405)
“Man’s dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.” (2415)

“Created in God’s image and called to know and love him, the person who seeks God discovers certain ways of coming to know him. These are also called proofs for the existence of God, not in the sense of proofs in the natural sciences, but rather in the sense of ‘converging and convincing arguments,’ which allow us to attain certainty about the truth.

These ways of approaching God from creation have a twofold point of departure: the physical world and the human person.” (31)

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