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EarthBeat



by Samantha Panchèvre

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Chapter 5, section 3: Dialogue and Transparency in Decision-Making

In this short section, Pope Francis discusses the importance of transparency when assessing the potential environmental impacts of any business proposition or governmental policy. Corrupt actors often try to conceal the material impacts of a given project and neglect to share adequate information with the people in that community. But Fransis insists: "The local population should have a special place at the table; they are concerned about their own future and that of their children, and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest" (183).

Then, Francis cites the Precautionary Principle which was adopted by the United Nations in the Rio Declaration of 1992 and states: "Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a pretext for postponing cost-effective measures." Francis explains: "This precautionary principle makes it possible to protect those who are most vulnerable and whose ability to defend their interests and to assemble incontrovertible evidence is limited. If objective information suggests that serious and irreversible damage may result, a project should be halted or modified, even in the absence of

indisputable proof" (186).

Francis notes that this principle "does not mean being opposed to any technological innovations which can bring about an improvement in the quality of life." Rather, it means "profit cannot be the sole criterion to be taken into account, and that, when significant new information comes to light, a reassessment should be made, with the involvement of all interested parties" (187).

REFLECT

The Precautionary Principle is a vague and much contested concept. Even though this idea is invoked in our everyday lives anytime someone says "better safe than sorry," once it's applied to an action with potentially grave consequences, it becomes ripe for debate. The video above describes this in the context of climate change, stating the Precautionary Principle "takes seriously that nothing is worth risking everything for." To agree on that simple statement requires everyone in the room to agree on what's at risk, and that depends on one's priorities and perspective.

For climate change, free market advocates tend to resist climate action (such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions) to protect profits and limit economic harm. Meanwhile, activists insist that inaction (or business-as-usual) risks climate catastrophe. You would think it's common sense to prioritize the health of the planet we all rely on, since there are no jobs on a dead planet, but that idea doesn't hold weight for those who prefer short-term gain over long-term sustainability. And so the two groups continue talking past each other, and progress is stalled.

ACT

In an ideal debate, the proponents of any activity that raises threats of harm should bear the burden of proof. However, even Fransis concedes, "There are certain environmental issues where it is not easy to achieve a broad consensus." In these cases, let us remember his advice: "Here I would state once more that the Church does not presume to settle scientific questions or to replace politics. But I am concerned to encourage an honest and open debate so that particular interests or ideologies will not prejudice the common good" (188). To do this, consider the technique Malcolm Gladwell popularized – summarize the other person's argument and ask them to summarize yours. This exercise can help people empathize with

each other, soften their opinions, and maybe even change them.

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