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Catholics at Copenhagen

by Rich Heffern

NCR Today

Irish Columban missionary Fr. Sean McDonagh sent this report from Copenhagen today on the Catholic presence at this and previous U. N. climate change conferences:

"Ever since my first meeting of the U.N. Framework Conference on Climate Change (UNFCCC), I have been interested in a 'Catholic presence' at these conferences. While Christian Aid and the World Council of Churches had a presence at the Nairobi Conference in 2006, there were very few Catholics in attendance.

In fact, the only Catholic symbol I saw was the Columban logo at the UP in Smoke stand. Columbans in the region of Britain have been involved in funding and producing the The UP in Smoke booklet on how climate change is impacting on the lives of poor people in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia for a number of years. Ms. Ellen Teague has worked tirelessly on these publications for the past few years.

My own presence at that event was due to consistent badgering by a Maryknoll priest, John Brinkmans who can be considered a veteran of the COP process. All in all, there were about 20 Catholics religious, associated with Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) present at Nairobi. The group did have an opportunity to meet with the papal nuncio, were we expressed our disappointment that there was no effective presence of the Holy See at the UFCCC. The Holy See is normally represented by the local nuncio and his staff. We pointed out that this is very unsatisfactory, since one cannot expect a nuncio in a particular country to be up-to-speed on the various strands of the Conference of the Parties (COP) process. Even those who have attended a number of COP meetings are often still mesmerized by the abbreviations and acronyms which are constantly used by everyone at the negotiation and side-events. A few examples might illustrate this: SBSTA is the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological

Advice or AWG-LGA the Ad-Hoc Working Group on Long-term Cooperative Action.

We pointed out that the Holy See sent a dedicated group of experts to both the U.N. Population Conference in 1995 and the U.N. Convention on Women in Beijing the following year. This begs the question whether the Holy See saw those other two conferences as more important than the on-going attempt to get a binding treaty which will lower greenhouse gas emissions and protect the most vulnerable people who will be affected, in one way or another, by the increased carbon which is already in the atmosphere. We pointed out that the World Council of Churches (WCC) has always sent a delegation made up of people who are familiar with the climate change debate and the sometime arcane processes of the COP.

We told the nuncio that, rightly or wrongly, people do not link the Catholic church with having a well worked out and viable approach to God's creation. We pointed to the then recently published Compendium of the Catholic Social Doctrine of the Church which was published in 2004. While in the rest of document the teaching on human work, social justice and development of peoples is competent, chapter 10 which deals with the environment, is very weak. Only a single paragraph referred to climate change.

There was a significant growth in the number of Catholics who attended COP 13 in Bali. But once again, there was no dedicated delegation from the Holy See. The local nuncio represented the Vatican. The secretary to the nuncio, was Msg.r Andrew Vinanu Thanya-anan. He was present at my doctoral graduation in the College of Physicians in Dublin in Nov. 2006, soon after I returned from Nairobi. He was also known to have supplied cans of Guinness to some Columbans in Dalgan! In mid 2007, he had been transferred to Indonesia. I was delighted to see him, as he was very helpful in arranging to have a letter, signed by a number of us, delivered to the nuncio. The letter returned to our theme on the need for the Catholic church to take climate change more seriously.

COP 14 took place in Poznan in Poland in Dec. 2008. As a Catholic country one would have expected a greater pastoral presence at that COP. However, this did not happen. At a Mass the previous Sunday, the local archbishop did mention the meeting, but didn't have much to say about it, according to my informant, a Polish Franciscan. Catholic organizations such as CIDSE, an umbrella group for 16 Catholic development agencies in Europe and North America, launched a document, Development and Climate Justice. The document can be downloaded from the CIDSE site www.cidse.org The document links social justice concerns and ecological issues, especially how climate change affects the poor. Unfortunately, the perspective is completely human-centered, both in how climate change is affecting people now and in the future. There is no concern for the integrity or well-being of ecosystems, on which humans depend for everything. But, to be fair, the document reflects where Rome is currently at in terms of ecological theology.

On Dec. 6th 2009, after praying the Angelus, Pope Benedict XVI wished success to the world leaders who would gather in Denmark to seek an agreement on how to tackle climate change in a fair and just way. In his brief remarks the pope recalled that the way to protect the earth was to include respect for God's laws and the moral dimension of human life. He went on to say that: "I hope that the work will help identify actions respectful and favorable to solidarity development founded on the dignity of the human person and oriented towards the common good." (zenit.org December 6, 2009). He spoke about protecting the interests of the poor and future generations.

On this occasion the delegation of the Holy See is headed by Archbishop Celistino Migliore, the permanent observer for the Holy See at the United Nations in New York. He has written and spoken regularly about climate change within the United Nations. The delegation includes a climate expert

Marcus Wandinger and Paolo Conversi, an official from the Vatican Secretariat of State, who also teaches human ecology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

The Vatican delegation will be supporting a robust treaty which embodies sufficient curbs on greenhouse gas emissions to keep the average global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius. The target for Annex I countries ought to be a 40 percent reduction in greenhouse gases before 2020. It is also championing a scaling up of the Adaptation Fund. It calculates that, at least, \$195 billion per annum needs to be made available to economically poor countries to adequately adapt to the climate change consequences which are already in the pipeline.

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I met with Archbishop Migliore briefly at the X-Ray security check on the way into the COP on Wednesday. He had just arrived from New York and, unfortunately, found himself in the NGOs line rather than in the line for the Parties. I wished him every success in his negotiations, realizing that there is a mountain to climb in order to reach a fair, ambitious, transparent and binding treaty."

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