

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

June 22, 2012 at 11:18am

Will ecological hope return on the road to Rio?

by Douglas W. Kmiec

COMMENTARY

The world is meeting this week in Rio de Janeiro for the 20th anniversary of the earth summit. Under the aegis of the UN, the focus of the meeting is sustainability and eradicating poverty. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is subbing for President Barack Obama, who chose to attend instead a G-20 session devoted to the troubled economy.

This being 2012 and an election year, it is understandable why the president would feel the necessity to focus upon economic growth over RIO+20, as the conclave on environmental preservation is being called.

Unfortunately for the environment, that order of presidential priority explains why very little is expected for the Rio effort beyond the 283 paragraphs of a document called "the world we want," which, after using up what seems like an entire rainforest to repeat the word "sustainability" at least that many times, "welcomes" (hold onto to your greenhouse gases) the call of our world leaders to have voluntary commitments made by "stakeholders" "registered" on the Internet. That's nice, but it conveys none of the urgency of a climate radically changed and the unpredictable and widespread devastation from Fukushima to New Orleans. But is there something that can be realistically done beyond a wish list intended to inspire "networks to implement concrete policies, plans, programs, projects and actions to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication"?

Maybe, but it will be the first time in world history that vague recitals that we all inhabit a single planet transform themselves into an enforceable environmental obligation, a proposition that few beyond Spider-Man or the Avengers in 3-D would take seriously. Of course, in the new film, it turns out Martin Sheen (aka President Bartlett on "The West Wing") is Spider-Man's uncle, which makes Charlie his cousin, which may be enough to scare the next BP into greater corporate responsibility before systematically

destroying more of the planet.

Twenty years ago, during the first Rio earth summit, someone had the useful idea to try to insert a healthy environment into a document like the UN or European Declaration of Human Rights. Good thought, except the words again got in the way. Maurice Strong, a Canadian socialist (shush) now living in China captured the "right" in more than 2,400 words divided into sections (called pillars), which have 16 main principles containing 61 supporting principles. The attempt to forge an international governance body at least akin to the European Court of Human Rights, however, failed.

Mr. Strong is back leading the effort in Rio, with corporate sponsors ponying up the first-class airfare from Beijing. It may seem snarky to highlight that, especially since my own sponsor failed to materialize, which left me and my UN accreditation at home. My assignment was to help articulate -- presumably more succinctly -- an ethical vision that will bring more than eye strain.

It's not easy. Biking most days about 10 miles roundtrip to morning appointments, I take the environmental damage represented by the buildup of carbon-based gases seriously; I also know from my diplomatic experience that America has been issued a challenge by China as to which nation will have in place solar, wind and other technologies that don't add to the ozone layer. I have enough red, white and blue coursing in my veins to want my national team to meet that international challenge. Those who proclaim that possibility to be fanciful simply don't remember JFK's proclamation that brought us first to the moon.

No country, from tiny Malta to the far-flung expanse of America, is prepared to yield national sovereignty to just any conception of foreign influence. We prefer the 90 words Abe Lincoln spoke at Gettysburg to dense manifestos.

And therein lies the ethical precept: that all men and women are created equal, with an equal right to govern. Moreover, when "we the people" organize ourselves as governments, we are entrusted with the power to govern only so long as what we promote transcends narrow self-interest and affirms "a new birth of freedom." The freedom of speech and religion are a given; no one save the most narrow-minded iconoclast would say otherwise. Yet FDR, from whom this list is borrowed, emphasized that society progresses beyond those foundational freedoms only when it is structured to address freedom from want and freedom from fear.

Are we going to lead or retard this fuller conception of freedom? In a few days, the Supreme Court will reveal its assessment of our nation's capacity to meet the urgent cries of our neighbor's resident nearby, and that will likely speak volumes for how we intend to treat our neighbors far distant.

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