

Report on COP 24 Climate Meeting in Katowice, Poland

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COP 24 (the 24th annual "Conference of the Parties" on climate change) was held in Katowice, Poland from December 3-12, 2019. Over 32,000 people attended, representing nearly 200 countries and many civil society representatives. Poland is 95% Catholic. In preparation for COP 24, its Catholic Episcopal conference sent a letter to all 10,000 parishes in the country encouraging them to pray for the climate negotiations in Katowice. They sent out over 2 million prayer cards to be used during the 2-week meeting.

A "climate pilgrimage" from the Vatican to Katowice preceded the meeting. Pilgrims journeyed for 65 days across 6 countries. They walked in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world from the Philippines, the Pacific Islands, and across Europe to stand together for climate justice. Among the pilgrims were survivors of super typhoon Haiyan in 2013, which claimed over 10,000 lives in just 2 hours in the Philippines. Survivors helped to put a human face on the climate change crisis and hoped to motivate national and international leaders to act. In the spirit of *Laudato Si*, they sought to highlight our commitment to protect our common home. To this end, the pilgrims called for:

- An ambitious global rule book that ensures a quick end to the fossil fuel era
- A just transition to a clean energy economy
- A new practice of integral ecology by individuals and communities

The opening of the meeting was a disappointment to many. In his welcoming address, Polish President Andrzej Duda defended Poland's use of coal. The Polish coal industry was prominently featured at Poland's official booth at the conference and was one of the sponsors of the event. Poland is considered to have one of the European Union's poorest

air quality because of its level of coal burning. Although they claim that they can offset the carbon emissions created by their burning of coal by increasing the removal of greenhouse gasses through reforestation efforts, most experts agree that drastic reductions in the use of fossil fuels along with reforestation are needed. Without serious efforts on both fronts, it is predicted that the planet will pass the threshold of 1.5 degrees Celsius temperature rise in the year 2030. We have just 12 years left in which to act decisively to save our common home.

Since the Paris Agreement in 2015, climate change has not been a high priority for many world leaders. The hope for COP 24 was that they would be able to put rules in place so that countries will fulfill their commitments made in Paris. One such commitment was that developed countries would raise \$100 billion for the implementation of sustainable development in poorer countries. Another aim in Paris was to develop implementation indices to be reported on by each country by 2020 and regularly after that. After the first week of the conference in Poland, the USA along with Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Russia took a public position that they will not accept the recent international report calling for keeping global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. In response to this, the Vatican, along with representatives from Malawi, the Pacific Islands and others already severely affected by climate change, held a press conference. They gave testimonies and insisted that the 1.5 degrees Celsius goal be maintained. COP 24 did agree to keep the goal in place.

COP 24 succeeded in developing a 156-page rule book which includes guidelines for implementing the Paris Agreement. It includes how countries will report their progress, or lack thereof, in meeting their pledges. Government leaders adopted the Katowice Climate Package to promote cooperation on climate change. The aim is to benefit all people, especially the most vulnerable. It promotes transparency and information sharing on progress in fighting climate change. The agreement includes:

- Partnership for electromobility and zero emission transportation. This means developing new electronic modes of transportation with zero emissions.
- Solidarity and just transition. This is a commitment to fair and solidarity-based economic development and jobs that are economically, socially, environmentally and climatically responsible.
- Declaration on "Forests for Climate". This aims at conserving and increasing forests throughout the world. The capacity of forests to absorb CO₂ and thereby reduce climate change is critical but must be accompanied by a drastic and immediate movement away from fossil fuels.

In October 2019 the Pope is convening a synod on Integral Ecology, on the Amazon, and on the role of the Church in the Amazon. It will put a spotlight on the Amazon region, which has been called the "lungs of the planet". Although forest loss significantly decreased in Indonesia in recent years, it increased in Brazil. The present president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, has openly said that he plans to dismantle the country's environmental regulations without regard for the rainforest or for the indigenous people who live there. This could result in personal and environmental devastation in the region and would negatively impact global climate change. Bolsonaro also recently announced that Brazil is pulling out as host of the 2019 COP 25 conference. The NGO Climate Action Network said:

Deforestation has already increased by 32% between August and November. According to Brazilian scientists, it could climb to a mind-boggling 25,000 square kilometers (nearly one Belgium) as year, with resulting emissions of 3 billion tons of CO₂. This would be like adding 10 Polands to the atmosphere—and would be a sure blow to any chance of the world staying below 1.5 degrees.

It is this critical situation of environmental threat and danger to the indigenous populations of the Amazon that seems to have prompted Pope Francis to call for the synod on Integral Ecology.

In the USA, even though President Trump's administration continues to deny the dangers of climate change and the science it is based on, the move away from fossil fuels has already begun. Individual states and municipalities continue to pass laws that limit carbon emissions in order to protect the environment. We call on all citizens to be relentless in pressuring their local and national governments to take meaningful and immediate action to save our planet. The Catholic Church must lead by example. We call on all Catholic institutions to green their buildings and lands, reduce their carbon footprint and divest from the fossil fuel industry. We need to join our voice with those who oppose fracking, off shore oil drilling, arctic oil exploration and drilling, and all new oil pipelines. We need to move away from fossil fuels NOW. If we are truly committed to saving our planet, then we need to move away from fossil fuel infrastructure expansion, slowly eliminate fossil fuel use, and instead invest in renewable, clean energy sources while re-educating and re-employing fossil fuel industry workers for the clean energy jobs of the future. *Laudato Si* calls us to care for our common home. Let us each do what we can to reduce our carbon footprint and restore green space whenever and wherever we can. But most of all, let us call for and support greater efforts by government leaders to take the drastic actions that are needed to save the planet.