

## Environmental Justice

*“Nurturing and cherishing creation is a command God gives not only at the beginning of history, but to each of us. It is part of his plan; it means causing the world to grow responsibly, transforming it so that it may be a garden, a habitable place for everyone.”* -- Pope Francis, 6/5/2013

In 1995, author Jonathan Kozol wrote the *New York Times* bestseller, *Amazing Grace - The Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. The true story takes place in South Bronx, one of the toughest sections of New York City. Kozol spent months talking to many families who lived in the neighborhood of Mott Haven, a precinct that was plagued by a high homicide rate, deplorable housing conditions, and drug addiction.

The residents of Mott Haven, like in so many other inner city communities, suffered more than their fair share of health problems. Asthma, in particular, ran rampant among the children of this impoverished community. The most memorable of those children was seven-year-old Cliffie. The young, rambunctious boy eagerly gave Kozol a tour of his neighborhood, including a stop that Cliffie found especially fascinating: a waste incinerator.

Kozol looked into the history of the facility and provided a vivid description of what was burned, including “bedding, bandages and syringes” from fourteen New York City hospitals. “The waste products ... were initially going to be burned at an incinerator scheduled to be built along the East Side of Manhattan, but the siting of a burner there had been successfully resisted by the parents of the area because of fear of cancer risks.”

It has been more than ten years since I read *Amazing Grace*, but I have never forgotten that horrid image of toxins spewing into the air and scattering among the most vulnerable inhabitants of New York City. To me it is a heart-breaking example of environmental injustice and one that begs for a solution.

### **Moral Dimension**

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 1993 established the Environmental Justice Program (EJP) to “educate and motivate Catholics to a deeper reverence and respect for God’s creation, and to encourage Catholics to address environmental problems, particularly as they affect poor and vulnerable people. EJP acts as a resource for Catholic dioceses and state Catholic conferences, and through them Catholic parishes,” according to the program’s website (<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/environment/environmental-justice-program>).

The USCCB notes that the Catholic Church offers “a distinct perspective to the discussion of environmental questions by lifting up the moral dimensions of these issues and the needs of the most vulnerable among us. This unique contribution is rooted in Catholic teaching calling us to care for creation and for “the least of these.” (Matt. 25:40).

Concern for the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on the poor extends to all faith communities. “Dirty air. Unclean industries. Toxic dump sites. Incinerators. Excessive truck traffic. Lack of access to the decision-making process. Consistently, communities of color and poor communities suffer from more than their share of environmental health threats,” notes the religious-based organization, Green Faith, which was founded in 1992. Describing itself as “Interfaith Partners in Action for the Earth,” Green Faith supports advocacy on environmental justice and helps faith communities to become involved at all levels. More information about the interfaith group can be found at <http://greenfaith.org/>.

The longer we wait to address the pollution of the air we breathe and the water we drink and the longer we delay finding and using alternative energy sources to lessen the emission of greenhouse gases, the greater our planet will suffer from the consequences of our inaction, particularly those – like Cliffie - who contribute the least to the problem, yet suffer the most.

*“I would like then for all of us to take seriously the commitment to respect and cherish creation, being attentive to every person, to counter the culture of waste and disposal, to promote a culture of solidarity and of encounter.” -- Pope Francis, 6/5/2013*

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## **Action on Climate Change**

Last month, a group of interfaith leaders from Northern Virginia, including our Social Justice minister and sponsored by Greater Washington Interfaith Power and Light, visited Senator Warner’s office and made a compelling joint presentation on our concern for action on climate change. Despite our united efforts, the Senator made the disappointing decision to join a **letter** from six senators to the President, expressing concern about the forthcoming EPA rules limiting carbon pollution from *new* power plants. This raises the question of whether Sen. Warner will try to oppose the forthcoming EPA rules limiting climate pollution from existing power plants, which will be published in June.

**Please take a moment to call Sen. Warner's office: 202-224-2023**

*Suggested message:*

Hello, I'm {NAME} calling from Our Lady Queen of Peace in Arlington

Please let the Senator know that I was surprised and disappointed to hear that he signed onto the Donnelly-Heitkamp letter opposing the EPA carbon rules for new power plants.

Also, please ask him not do anything to interfere with the EPA's forthcoming carbon rules for existing power plants -- we are counting on Senator Warner to protect public health and our climate going forward.