

# Catholic Social Teaching: The Principle of the Common Good

## Goals

1. To clarify the meaning of the principle of the common good
2. To apply the principle of the common good to the problem of global climate change

## Begin first by helping participants to articulate their understanding of the common good.

Ask: What do you think “the common good” means? Listen for and affirm the following points:

- An over-arching principle of Catholic Social Teaching
- Caring for our neighbors as ourselves
- Society functions best when decisions are made with an eye toward what benefits everyone, and not just a few (communal benefit vs. greed).
- A world where all people have the opportunity to realize their full human potential, engage in productive work, and lead fulfilled lives.
- Human beings truly flourish only in the context of a community.
- Our common humanity
- Balance in nature (we are part of the web of life)
- The need for temperance

## To clarify or flesh out the meaning of the common good, read one or more of the brief quotes that follow.

Quotes about the Common Good from Catholic Social Teaching

The common good is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”

- *The Church in the Modern World,” Second Vatican Council*

“The person is not only sacred but also social. People have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.”

- *The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*

“Promoting community and the common good requires creating employment for all, caring for the less privileged, and providing for the future.”

- *Centesimus Annus*

## Assist participants in applying the principle of the common good to the problem of global climate change by using one or both of the discussion questions that follow.

For Discussion

1. At the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, President George H. W. Bush said, “The American way of life is not negotiable.” The United States represents less than 5% of the world’s population and consumes 30% of the Earth’s resources. If everyone on Earth consumed at the rate of the average American, we would need the resources of two extra planets.

How does the *statement* about the American way of life and the *statistic* about American consumption fit with the principle of the common good?

2. How do you think people in countries whose standard of living is far below the level of affluence of the U.S. feel about the U.S.?
- Do they want to have what we have? If other countries who want what we have find ways to achieve their goals, how will this affect global warming?
  - Have you heard of the Kyoto Protocol? The Kyoto Protocol is an amendment to an international treaty on climate change in which signing nations agree to specific reductions of greenhouse gas emissions. As of December 2006, 169 countries have signed the Protocol. Although the U.S. is responsible for one fourth of the carbon dioxide emitted around the world, 7122 million tons, it is not one of the signatories.
  - Do you think people in other countries are mad at the U.S. for taking more than its share and refusing to take responsible action? Do you think some countries would want to take violent action against the U.S. because of this? Do you think some countries would be unwilling to ally themselves with the U.S. in a military conflict?

**Conclude by asking participants to identify specific actions they can take to apply the principle of the common good to the problem of global climate change.**

### **Personal choices**

If Americans consume 30% of Earth's resources . . .  
If consumption is responsible for emission of  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the global carbon dioxide total . . .  
If carbon dioxide is responsible for the alarming increase in global temperature . . .  
. . . what can you do personally to reduce your level of consumption?  
Will you make a commitment to change one thing in your lifestyle?

### **Consumer power**

*Don't Buy It: Get Media Smart* is a media literacy Web site for young people that encourages users to think critically about media and become smart consumers. Activities on the site are designed to provide users with some of the skills and knowledge needed to question, analyze, interpret and evaluate media messages. Go to <http://pbskids.org/dontbuyit/about.html> for an introduction to the web page. The site has interactive buttons on advertising tricks, buying smart, your entertainment, and what you can do. There is one guide for teachers and another for parents.

Connect participants to the *Don't Buy It* and encourage them to explore the Web site. Then take ten minutes to ask, What can you do to buy less? Will you make a commitment to change one thing in your consumer behavior?

### **Political Action**

Organize your group to visit the office of your Senator or Representative – or invite your legislator to come to your church or school. To prepare for the visit, research ways to enhance political efficacy at [http://www.osjspm.org/legislative\\_advocacy.aspx](http://www.osjspm.org/legislative_advocacy.aspx).

Sign up for action alerts from a climate change advocacy group. Make phone calls and write letters to your legislators asking them to support climate change policies that address the needs of people of low income who will suffer the most as a result of climate change. Advise your legislator that the U.S. should share renewable energy technologies with developing countries.