

It's Time to Wake Up!

By Pat Murphy, Plan Curtail

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On September 24, 2015, Pope Francis addressed a joint session of Congress about the state of the world. His concerns relative to climate, poverty and violence were well received. As he opened his talk he said “Today I would like not only to address you, but through you the entire people of the United States.”

I had read his encyclical “Laudato Si’” and was pleased by his directness. There were 246 numbered points – I note 9 of them below.

#9. ...Bartholomew has drawn attention to the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems, which require that we look for solutions not only in technology but in a change of humanity; otherwise we would be dealing merely with symptoms. He asks us to replace consumption with sacrifice, greed with generosity,

wastefulness with a spirit of sharing, an asceticism which “entails learning to give, and not simply to give up.

#20. Technology, which, linked to business interests, is presented as the only way of solving these problems, in fact proves incapable of seeing the mysterious network of relations between things and so sometimes solves one problem only to create others.

#22. These problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.

#55. Some countries are gradually making significant progress, developing more effective controls and working to combat corruption. People may well have a growing ecological sensitivity but it has not succeeded in changing their harmful habits of consumption which, rather than decreasing, appear to be growing all the more. ...An outsider looking at our world would be amazed at such behavior, which at times appears self-destructive.

#56. In the meantime, economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. As a result, “whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule”.³³

#95. The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others. That is why the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive”.⁷⁸

#161. Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations' debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences.

#193. ... We know how unsustainable is the behavior of those who constantly consume and destroy, while others are not yet able to live in a way worthy of their human dignity. That is why the time has come to accept decreased growth in some parts of the world, in order to provide resources for other places to experience healthy growth. Benedict XVI has said that “technologically advanced societies must be prepared to encourage more sober lifestyles, while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency.”

#206. ... This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers. “Purchasing is always a moral – and not simply economic – act.” Today, in a word, “the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyle.”

Pleased though I was with the Popes visit, I could not forget the seemingly inexorable path on which we embarked many decades ago. There are weekly reminders of our significant problems. In an October 14, 2015 Guardian article entitled *Antarctic ice sheets face catastrophic collapse without deep emissions cuts*” author Karl Mathieson discusses a report published in the October issue of Nature entitled *The multi-millennial Antarctic commitment to future sea-level rise* by Golledge, Kowalewski, Naish, Levy, Fogwill and Gasson. The essence of the report was that steep cuts to emissions during the next decade are the only way to avoid a catastrophic collapse of Antarctic ice sheets. The report notes that a global temperature increase near 3 degrees Centigrade would imply the possibility that the ice shelves that hold back the giant continental ice sheets would be lost over the next few centuries. This could mean the raising of sea levels by two to ten feet by the year 2300. However, if temperatures remain within 2 degrees Centigrade the collapse of the shelves will stabilize and the sheets will remain mostly intact. To achieve this, the authors said the world will have to follow the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) lowest emissions scenario. This requires global emissions to peak around 2020 and decline to below zero by 2100.

At the Paris Climate Conference, December 2015, 150 governments representing 90% of worldwide CO₂ emissions submitted pledges to cut and curb their emissions. However, these pledges did not meet the 2 degrees Centigrade but are closer to 2.7 degrees Centigrade. This is too high to avoid Antarctic ice decline.

Fortunately, many people seem to be taking this more seriously in recent times. In an October 14, 2015 Times Science article *Americans Denial of Climate Change Hits Record Low, Survey Finds* by Justin Worland <http://time.com/4073881/climate-change-survey-united-states/>. The author refers to a survey from the National Surveys on Energy and Environment that shows 70% of U.S. residents believe the evidence supporting global warming. If the Pope, politicians and people are becoming more aware, we will hopefully find the methods of change to reverse course.

One recommendation comes from Wendell Berry. In an Essay entitled “Less Energy, More Life” from his latest book *Our Only World – Ten Essays*, (Counterpoint 2015), he opens with the following paragraph:

“Like a lot of people I know, I am concerned about mountaintop removal and climate change. But when we delay our concern until dangers have become sensational we are late. Whether or not we are too late is a question that should not interest us. Even if we are too late, we still must accept responsibility and try to make things better.”

He goes on to say

“If we are serious about these big problems, we have got to see that the solutions begin and end with ourselves. Thus we put an end to our habit of oversimplification. If we want to stop the impoverishment of land and people, we ourselves must be prepared to become poorer.

If we are to continue to respect ourselves as human beings, we have got to do all we can to slow and then stop the fossil fuel economy. But we must do this fully realizing that our success, if it happens, will change our world and our lives more radically than we can now imagine. Without that realization we cannot hope to succeed. ...

...We must understand that fossil fuel energy must be replaced, not just by “clean” energy, but also by less energy. The unlimited use of any energy would be as destructive as unlimited economic growth or any other unlimited force...”

This seems like good advice based on a sober appraisal of our situation. I have long thought that a change in lifestyle, one which significantly reduces fossil fuel use and thus CO₂ emissions, was inevitable. I covered the rationale in my book *Plan C: Community Survival Strategies for Peak Oil and Climate Change*, published in 2008 by New Society Publishers. Like most people in this field, I underestimated the danger and overestimated the solutions that might come from technology. I am now convinced that curtailment is the key.

Curtailment is the theme for Faith and my new web site PlanCurtail.org. It is an enhancement of the ideas in the book *Plan C* referred to above. I have learned a great deal in the last eight years since the book was published about how to reduce consumption. Plan Curtail will address broad issues of curtailment as well as techniques and products that are useful.

One personal difference for me in the last eight years is that I no longer view curtailing or using less energy as a sacrifice. I see that fossil fuel energy has been sacrificing the life of the earth in its myriad forms, including the lives of poorer and less technologically advanced people. I now have a sense of remorse for the unintentional damage I did with my wholesale commitment to the fossil fuel based American Way of Life. Like slave holders of old, I now see the costs of the affluence gained, in this case, from energy slaves.

A new lifestyle will likely be healthier for the body and even for the mind. More important is the need for increasing the health of the soul. Atonement may be one elixir that we need in order to embrace a low energy lifestyle and enjoy it.