

Observations from an Orthodox Christian at the COP-21 UN Summit on Climate

Citing a Looming Global Climate Crisis, World Leaders Gather for Talks

Report by Fred Krueger
November 30, 2015

The Opening Ceremonies

Le Bourget, Paris, France — World leaders gathered this morning to began a multinational effort that will develop a plan to hold off the worst consequences of climate change.

Reporters from the world’s major media, plus thousands of delegates and observers streamed into a heavily fenced and fortified area set up especially for this summit sponsored by the United Nations. Helicopters brought in heads of state while buses carried the majority of attendees from the Le Bourget train station about two miles away. Each person went through intense security checks while French police guarded the entrance and filled the streets to protect against any efforts to disrupt the process.

French President Francois Hollande opens proceedings

Francois Hollande opened this United Nations global summit on climate change with an address that was eloquent, insightful and specific with its bold recommendations. He called for massive action to hold down CO2 levels and prevent catastrophic climate change.

“Never have the stakes of an international conference been so high,” said President Hollande before a packed plenary session. “What is at stake is no less than the future of the planet, the future of life,” he declared.

“This is a historic gathering. 150 heads of state are gathered here. Never before have so many world leaders gathered together. Never before have the stakes been so high. This summit on global climate change is about the future of the planet.

“The eyes of the world are upon us. We must leave a planet preserved for the future. All temperature records are being broken. Carbon dioxide levels are rising, so are extreme weather events, droughts, flooding, hurricane intensities. These are all on the increase. The rate of polar ice melt, rising sea levels, the changing chemistry of the oceans, millions and millions of people are affected.... The annual costs are already in the billions of dollars. Global warming is happening now.”

“Global warming,” he said, “heralds future conflicts just as clouds herald a storm. It causes migration which throws more refugees out onto the roads than warfare itself.” He recognized that never – “truly NEVER,” he emphasized – have the stakes of an international meeting been so high. The future of the planet, and the future of life, are at stake.”

He told the audience and the world that “2015 is a year that has beaten all previous records....” Record high temperatures, record CO₂ concentrations and record numbers of extreme climate events. This has caused droughts, floods, cyclones, melting ice, rising sea levels and ocean acidification.

We have a responsibility to poor countries. They have done the least to bring about this change, but they are impacted the most. Our industries must change their ways. So much of the climate impact is upon ordinary people. We are facing an emergency. Our greatest challenge is to move beyond an era of competition to an era of cooperation.

President Hollande acknowledged the recommendations of scientists around the world, including the IPCC, that “to prevent catastrophic and irreversible climate change we must keep warming below 2° C from pre-industrial levels.” He said we [world leaders] “need to define and mark out a credible path that will enable us to contain global warming below 2° C or even 1.5° C, if possible.”

The National Presentations

The proceedings then moved into a series of opening statements. Top world leaders lined up and will provide statements representing how climate change is understood by the world's major nations. President Obama will speak first, following by Chinese President Xi Jinping, then Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, and others. Each leader will provide a perspective on climate change and outline how this deepening problem should be addressed.

Many spoke of the urgency of the task, but also the hope that a deal could be reached regardless of the differences voiced by various leaders. This optimistic tone brought a spirit of hope and congeniality to the opening of COP21.

During the next two weeks, diplomats together with an army of bureaucrats and assorted delegates plan to forge a new international agreement to reduce planet-warming greenhouse gas emissions.

As the conference opens, a growing body of peer-reviewed scientific evidence shows that the destructive effects of climate change are already beginning to sweep around the planet. At the same time the global economy continues to spew out fossil fuel emissions that are changing the world's atmosphere and causing rising sea levels, intense droughts and food shortages, more destructive storms and floods, and many other catastrophic effects.

Previous efforts to reach agreements have seen nations prioritize their own national situations without respect or regard for the global picture. This year the United States and China, the planet's two largest greenhouse gas polluters, have negotiated a private deal to reduce emissions. Today President Obama and President Xi will urge others to join them in solving the climate problem. This common sense of purpose signaled a new tone in COP interchanges and introduced a spirit of cooperation in the negotiations which has been absent in previous COPs.

Remarks by President Obama

“President Hollande,
Mr. Secretary General,
Fellow leaders.
We have come to Paris to show our
resolve....



“Nearly 200 nations have assembled here this week.... We face the growing threat of climate change [which] could define the contours of this century more dramatically than any previous gathering. What should give us hope that this is a turning point... is the fact that our nations share a sense of urgency about this challenge and a growing realization that it is within our power to do something about it.

“Our understanding of the ways human beings disrupt the climate advances by the day. Fourteen of the fifteen warmest years on record have occurred since the year 2000 – and 2015 is on pace to be the warmest year of all. No nation – large or small, wealthy or poor – is immune to what this means.”

Before the entire gathering President Obama admitted that the United States has been responsible for a large share of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere as well as some blame for the damage that these emissions have brought to the planet's atmosphere.

He declared that the growing threat of climate change would define this century more dramatically than any other action. “I’ve come here personally, as the leader of the world’s largest economy and the second-largest emitter... to say that the United States of America not only recognizes its role in creating this problem, but we embrace our responsibility to do something about it.”

Already, prior to Paris, more than 180 countries representing nearly 95 percent of global emissions have put forward their own climate targets. That is progress. For our part, America is on track to reach the emissions targets that I set six years ago in Copenhagen – we will reduce our carbon emissions in the range of 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. And that's why, last year, I set a new target: America will reduce our emissions 26% to 28% below

2005 levels within 10 years from now.

One of the enemies that we'll be fighting at this conference is cynicism, the notion we can't do anything about climate change. Our progress should give us hope during these two weeks, hope that is rooted in collective action....

Here, in Paris, let's secure an agreement that builds in ambition, where progress paves the way for regularly updated targets – targets that are not set for each of us but by each of us, taking into account the differences that each nation is facing.

Here in Paris, let's agree to a strong system of transparency that gives each of us the confidence that all of us are meeting our commitments....

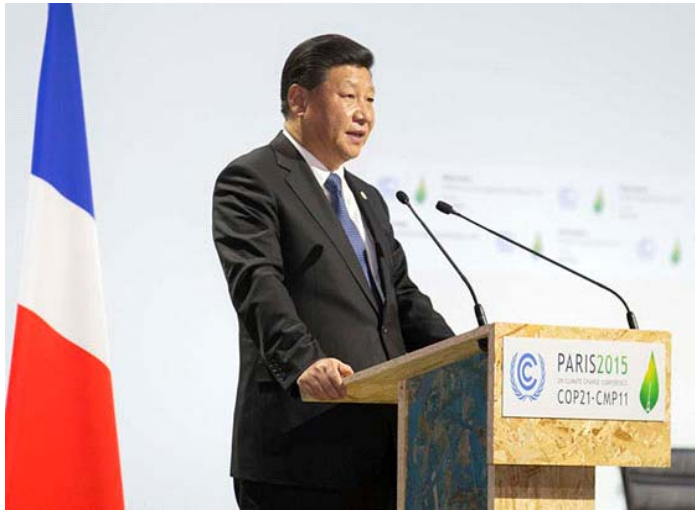
Here in Paris, let's make sure that resources flow to the countries that need help preparing for the impacts of climate change that we can no longer avoid. We know that many nations have contributed little to climate change but will be the first to feel its most destructive effects. For some, particularly island nations... climate change is a threat to their very existence.

And finally, here in Paris, let's show businesses and investors that the global economy is on a firm path towards a low-carbon future. If we put the right rules and incentives in place, we'll unleash the creative power of our best scientists and engineers and entrepreneurs to deploy clean energy technologies and the new jobs and new opportunities that they create all around the world. ... Let's send that signal.

That's what we seek in these next two weeks. This will not simply be an agreement to roll back the pollution we put into our skies, but an agreement that helps us lift people from poverty without condemning the next generation to a planet that's beyond its capacity to repair. ...

For I believe, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that there is such a thing as being "too late." And when it comes to climate change, that hour is almost upon us. But if we act here, if we act now, if we place our own short-term interests behind the air that our young people will breathe, and the food that they will eat, and the water that they will drink, and the hopes and dreams that sustain their lives, then we won't be too late for them.

Chinese President Xi Jin-ping



President Xi spoke next to the delegates. As he spoke, China and other parts of Asia were experiencing an air pollution "red alert" because of record levels of particle pollutants, leaving cities and suburbs submerged in a dense and sickening smog.

President Hollande, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thanks to joint efforts of all parties since the United Nations Convention on Climate Change entered into force over 20 years ago, global actions on climate change have made progress, although there are still numerous difficulties and challenges. This Paris Conference is hence convened to strengthen implementation and bring about a comprehensive, balanced, ambitious and binding agreement on climate change.

“A successful international agreement should not just address immediate challenges but more importantly, it should also present a vision for the future. The Paris agreement should focus on strengthening post-2020 global actions on climate change and boost global efforts to pursue sustainable development.

“The Paris agreement should help galvanize global efforts and encourage broad participation. The agreement should provide institutional arrangements that propel countries to make concerted efforts. Besides governments, it should also mobilize businesses, non-governmental organizations and all players in society to participate in international cooperation on climate change, thus raising public awareness of pooling resources on climate change.”

This Paris agreement should help increase input of resources to ensure actions on climate change. To obtain financial and technical support for capacity building is essential for developing countries to address climate

change. Developed countries should honor their commitment of mobilizing US \$100 billion each year before 2020 and provide stronger financial support to developing countries afterwards. It is also important that climate-friendly technologies should be transferred to developing countries to help them build green economy.

The Paris agreement should accommodate the national conditions of various countries and lay emphasis on practical results. It is imperative to respect differences among countries, especially developing countries, in domestic policies, capacity building and economic structure. A one-size-fits-all approach must be avoided. Addressing climate change should not deny the legitimate needs of developing countries to reduce poverty and improve their people's living Standards. Special needs of the developing countries must be well attended to.

In concluding, President Xi emphasized, “Climate change is a huge challenge.” It is “very important for China and the United States to be firmly committed to building a new model of cooperative relations,” including “partnering with each other to ensure that the climate conference achieves its expected targets.”

Despite American and Chinese pledges of cooperation, huge hurdles remain before a deal can be reached.

An initial obstacle is that almost 200 countries must reach unanimity before any accord can become legally binding.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he concluded at the end of his talk, “Tackling climate change is a shared mission for all mankind. All eyes are now on Paris. Let us join hands to contribute to the establishment of an equitable and effective global mechanism on climate change, work for global sustainable development at a higher level and bring about new international relations featuring win-win cooperation.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi

Standing in potential opposition to any agreement is an emerging coalition of developing nations led by India.

Prime Minister Modi argued that it is not right for poor countries to limit economic growth as a solution to the climate problem because they have little responsibility for the creation of this condition. This climate problem, he said, was created by western industrial nations, not poor developing countries.



India is the world's third-largest greenhouse gas polluter. Prime Minister Modi maintains that the less developed nations must have the right to burn carbon to grow their economies, regardless of the short or long term consequences. "Otherwise we can never pull ourselves up out of poverty."

"Climate change is the result of global warming that came from the prosperity and progress of industrial development powered by fossil fuels. Nevertheless, we face its consequences today. We see it in new risks to our farmers, changes in weather patterns, and the intensity of natural disasters."

Modi demanded that emissions reductions in India must be paired with billions of dollars of investment donations from the developed world. Those who have caused this condition must help poor countries make the transition from fossil fuels to cleaner forms of energy.

He also asked, on behalf of India and other developing nations, that developed countries like the U.S. must commit to greater reductions in the amount of greenhouse gases they emit, taking larger responsibility commensurate with the damage already done to the environment over the past decades as they industrialized.

"Your Excellencies, The presence of 196 countries tells us that we have a chance to unite behind a common purpose. We will succeed if we have the wisdom and courage to craft a genuinely collective partnership that balances responsibilities and capabilities with aspirations and needs."

Russian President Vladimir Putin

“Climate change has become one of the gravest challenges humanity is facing,” he said. “Russia will be actively addressing global warming.”

This declaration was a relief to many negotiators. In the past Putin has expressed skepticism about climate change. Russia, as a major petrostate, relies heavily on fossil fuel production, the production of fossil fuels, especially gas.

Over the past month President Putin has held preliminary discussions with German Chancellor Angela Merkel during which he gave assurances that Russian negotiators would not block an agreement if it had the backing of other major countries.

In his statement before the assembled world leaders, President Putin said, “We in Russia have gone beyond the target fixed by the Kyoto Protocol for the period from 1991 to 2012. Russia not only prevented the growth of greenhouse gas emissions, but also significantly reduced it,” Putin said.

“Nearly 40 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent were not released into the atmosphere. As a comparison, the total emissions of all countries in 2012 reached 46 billion tons.”

Russia is planning to keep progressing by bringing breakthrough technologies into practice, “including nanotechnology,” Putin continued, saying the country is also open to exchange and share the findings.

In addition, Putin has also promised Russia will reduce its polluting emissions by 70 percent by 2030 as compared to base level in 1990.

A new agreement must lay emphasis on the role of forests as major greenhouse gases absorber, Putin said. This would be especially important to Russia with its large forest lands. Preserving the lungs of our planet is a top priority, he added.

Russia is also going to provide financial and other support to developing countries willing to deal with climate change.



At the End of the Day

This first day of this 2015 United Nations Summit on climate change has been one the largest gatherings of world leaders in history. Ahead of them lies the challenge of coming into agreement on how to stave off the worst consequences of global climate change.

Besides the officials from all over the world, the event is expected to get a big lift from prominent business leaders and philanthropists. Some of them are using the talks to announce substantial donations to help the cause of reducing emissions, developing alternative energy sources, conservation, and aiding poor and low-lying countries expected to be most affected by climate change.

"A political moment like this may not come again," declared U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. "We have never before faced such a test. But neither have we encountered such great opportunity."

At the end of the day, the U.S. State Department announced a pledge of \$248 million to help fund the world's least-developed countries ability to move into a future that is less reliant on carbon fuels. This will also help secure their cooperation and support for a final agreement on climate.

It is presumed that President Obama's efforts – as well as his pledges – will meet resistance from republicans in the U.S. Congress. Already congressional republicans are promising to block the president's climate change policies. Because of Senate opposition it is assumed that any climate agreement will not be a binding treaty because that would require the formal support of the Senate. Rather any agreement will need to be a general non-binding document that sets future goals rather than legal commitments.

After today's first round of statements, the seriousness of the day's events began to sink in to delegates and attendees alike. President Francois Hollande's opening words seemed ever more pertinent as his message echoes through our minds. "Never before have the stakes been so high because this summit is about the future of the planet, the future of life."

Full Text of Statement by U.S. President Obama

November 30, 2015
Le Bourget, Paris, France

President Hollande, Mr. Secretary General, fellow leaders. We have come to Paris to show our resolve.

We offer our condolences to the people of France for the barbaric attacks on this beautiful city. We stand united in solidarity not only to deliver justice to the terrorist network responsible for those attacks but to protect our people and uphold the enduring values that keep us strong and keep us free. And we salute the people of Paris for insisting this crucial conference go on -- an act of defiance that proves nothing will deter us from building the future we want for our children. What greater rejection of those who would tear down our world than marshaling our best efforts to save it?

Nearly 200 nations have assembled here this week -- a declaration that for all the challenges we face, the growing threat of climate change could define the contours of this century more dramatically than any other. What should give us hope that this is a turning point, that this is the moment we finally determined we would save our planet, is the fact that our nations share a sense of urgency about this challenge and a growing realization that it is within our power to do something about it.

Our understanding of the ways human beings disrupt the climate advances by the day. Fourteen of the fifteen warmest years on record have occurred since the year 2000 -- and 2015 is on pace to be the warmest year of all. No nation -- large or small, wealthy or poor -- is immune to what this means.

This summer, I saw the effects of climate change firsthand in our northernmost state, Alaska, where the sea is already swallowing villages and eroding shorelines; where permafrost thaws and the tundra burns; where glaciers are melting at a pace unprecedented in modern times. And it was a preview of one possible future -- a glimpse of our children's fate if the climate keeps changing faster than our efforts to address it. Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields that no longer grow. Political disruptions that trigger new conflict, and even more floods of desperate peoples seeking the sanctuary of nations not their own.

That future is not one of strong economies, nor is it one where fragile states can find their footing. That future is one that we have the power to change. Right here. Right now. But only if we rise to this moment. As one of America's governors has said, "We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change, and the last generation that can do something about it."

I've come here personally, as the leader of the world's largest economy and the second-largest emitter, to say that the United States of America not only recognizes our role in creating this problem, we embrace our responsibility to do something about it.

Over the last seven years, we've made ambitious investments in clean energy, and ambitious reductions in our carbon emissions. We've multiplied wind power threefold, and solar power more than twentyfold, helping create parts of America where these clean power sources are finally cheaper than dirtier, conventional power. We've invested in energy efficiency in every way imaginable. We've said no to infrastructure that would pull high-carbon fossil fuels from the ground, and we've said yes to the first-ever set of national standards limiting the amount of carbon pollution our power plants can release into the sky.

The advances we've made have helped drive our economic output to all-time highs, and drive our carbon pollution to its lowest levels in two decades.

But the good news is this is not an American trend alone. Last year, the global economy grew while global carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels stayed flat. And what this means can't be overstated. We have broken the old arguments for inaction. We have proved that strong economic growth and a safer environment no longer have to conflict with one another; they can work in concert with one another.

And that should give us hope. One of the enemies that we'll be fighting at this conference is cynicism, the notion we can't do anything about climate change. Our progress should give us hope during these two weeks -- hope that is rooted in collective action.

Earlier this month in Dubai, after years of delay, the world agreed to work together to cut the super-pollutants known as HFCs. That's progress.

Already, prior to Paris, more than 180 countries representing nearly 95 percent of global emissions have put forward their own climate targets. That is progress. For our part, America is on track to reach the emissions targets that I set six years ago in Copenhagen -- we will reduce our carbon emissions in the range of 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. And that's why, last year, I set a new target: America will reduce our emissions 26 to 28 percent below 2005 levels within 10 years from now.

So our task here in Paris is to turn these achievements into an enduring framework for human progress -- not a stopgap solution, but a long-term strategy that gives the world confidence in a low-carbon future.

Here, in Paris, let's secure an agreement that builds in ambition, where progress paves the way for regularly updated targets -- targets that are not set for each of us but by each of us, taking into account the differences that each nation is facing.

Here in Paris, let's agree to a strong system of transparency that gives each of us the confidence that all of us are meeting our commitments. And let's make sure that the countries who don't yet have the full capacity to report on their targets receive the support that they need.

Here in Paris, let's reaffirm our commitment that resources will be there for countries willing to do their part to skip the dirty phase of development. And I recognize this will not be easy. It will take a commitment to innovation and the capital to continue driving down the cost of clean energy. And that's why, this afternoon, I'll join many of you to announce an historic joint effort to accelerate public and private clean energy innovation on a global scale.

Here in Paris, let's also make sure that these resources flow to the countries that need help preparing for the impacts of climate change that we can no longer avoid. We know the truth that many nations have contributed little to climate change but will be the first to feel its most destructive effects. For some, particularly island nations -- whose leaders I'll meet with tomorrow -- climate change is a threat to their very existence. And that's why today, in concert with other nations, America confirms our strong and ongoing commitment to the Least Developed Countries Fund. And tomorrow, we'll pledge new contributions to risk insurance initiatives that help vulnerable

populations rebuild stronger after climate-related disasters.

And finally, here in Paris, let's show businesses and investors that the global economy is on a firm path towards a low-carbon future. If we put the right rules and incentives in place, we'll unleash the creative power of our best scientists and engineers and entrepreneurs to deploy clean energy technologies and the new jobs and new opportunities that they create all around the world. There are hundreds of billions of dollars ready to deploy to countries around the world if they get the signal that we mean business this time. Let's send that signal.

That's what we seek in these next two weeks. Not simply an agreement to roll back the pollution we put into our skies, but an agreement that helps us lift people from poverty without condemning the next generation to a planet that's beyond its capacity to repair. Here, in Paris, we can show the world what is possible when we come together, united in common effort and by a common purpose.

And let there be no doubt, the next generation is watching what we do. Just over a week ago, I was in Malaysia, where I held a town hall with young people, and the first question I received was from a young Indonesian woman. And it wasn't about terrorism, it wasn't about the economy, it wasn't about human rights. It was about climate change. And she asked whether I was optimistic about what we can achieve here in Paris, and what young people like her could do to help.

I want our actions to show her that we're listening. I want our actions to be big enough to draw on the talents of all our people -- men and women, rich and poor -- I want to show her passionate, idealistic young generation that we care about their future.

For I believe, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that there is such a thing as being too late. And when it comes to climate change, that hour is almost upon us. But if we act here, if we act now, if we place our own short-term interests behind the air that our young people will breathe, and the food that they will eat, and the water that they will drink, and the hopes and dreams that sustain their lives, then we won't be too late for them.

And, my fellow leaders, accepting this challenge will not reward us with moments of victory that are clear or quick. Our progress will be measured differently -- in the suffering that is averted, and a planet that's preserved. And that's what's always made this so hard. Our generation may not even live to see the full realization of what we do here. But the knowledge that the next generation will be better off for what we do here -- can we imagine a more worthy reward than that? Passing that on to our children and our grandchildren, so that when they look back and they see what we did here in Paris, they can take pride in our achievement.

Let that be the common purpose here in Paris. A world that is worthy of our children. A world that is marked not by conflict, but by cooperation; and not by human suffering, but by human progress. A world that's safer, and more prosperous, and more secure, and more free than the one that we inherited.

Let's get to work. Thank you very much"

HAH Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew

A UNIQUE MOMENT IN HISTORY

Message by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to COP-21
December 8, 2015

As the world's expectations rise, our prayer is that political leadership will also rise to the occasion. COP-21 meeting in Paris is a unique historical moment, a critical opportunity to make the right choice. Political leaders may and should broker an agreement; but our planet is not negotiable.

In recent decades, the world has witnessed alarming ecological degradation, increasing failure to implement environmental policies, as well as an ever widening and scandalous gap between the rich (predominantly of the north and west) and the poor (predominantly in the south and east). As we have repeatedly emphasized, these vital challenges are not primarily political or economic. They are profoundly spiritual and ethical.

Our deep-felt conviction is that all of us -- are involved in this crisis. No single region or nation can be blamed for its cause, just as no single institution or discipline can resolve the crisis. We are all in the same boat. We are all called to care. And We are all obliged to respond.

By some mysterious connection that we do not always understand (and indeed sometimes choose to ignore), the earth reminds us of our vocation and obligation to protect our planet and its natural resources, to preserve and sustain it for our neighbors and for future generations. We will surely be judged by the urgency with which we respond to the ecological crisis of our age. The earth still has the resilience to heal, but only if we allow it to survive.

Unlike former generations, today we have no excuse. We have all the data and resources at hand. Yet, the crisis that we face has less to do with the environment and more to do with the way we perceive and treat the world. We are treating this earth in an inhumane and godless manner precisely because we see it in this way. Unless we radically change the way we perceive the world, unless we voluntarily transform our pattern of consumption, then we will simply be dealing with

symptoms, rather than with causes.

The responsibility of political leaders in Paris ... is crucial and urgent.... Their responsibility is compelling and desperate, particularly in view of the alarming flight and global plight of refugees. But it is imperative and authoritative when we consider the rise in temperatures and sea levels, the extinction of forests and species, or the extreme changes in weather and excessive impact of mining. In Paris, let the political agreement be ambitious and the legislative action tenacious.

An unprecedented gathering of world civil and religious leaders planned to be in attendance for the United Nations Climate Change Convention. We have witnessed an exceptional groundswell on the grass-roots level. Even where politicians are uncertain and apathetic, citizens of the world are resolved and undaunted.

Capacity crowds were to attend and march, pray and fast, in a revolutionary crusade to save the planet. Sadly, the multitude will be more moderate. But the momentum remains undiminished, the optimism undimmed. The entire world is still watching. The entire world is still waiting. The entire world is still wishing.

If political leaders have hitherto been cautious -- uncertain at best and unresponsive at worst -- then it is time to represent their people and nations. If political policy has hitherto been slow -- nominal at best and unsupportive at worst -- then it is time to speak out and take measures. If political action has hitherto been slow -- at best inadequate and inconsistent, at worst fruitless and futile -- then this is surely the time to ensure that it is not too little and too late.

Political leaders must choose and act with responsibility, with clarity, and with commitment. They must look for answers outside of their comfort zone, beyond familiar patterns or politics-as-usual. They must choose to care for the vulnerable and fragile, no longer to ignore the marginalized and suffering.

Religious leaders must persist in recalling and revealing the mystery of creation. There is a divine spark in the world and we must remind people that the value of our planet is much greater than any individual, corporate or national interest.

It is the moral obligation of us all to rediscover and reaffirm this compassionate vision of God's gift of creation.

