



Frequently Asked Questions
for the
**The Society of St. Vincent de Paul's
Environmental Stewardship and Ecological Conversion
Position Paper**

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are provided by the Voice of the Poor Committee to contextualize the National Position Paper. They will be revised from time to time to provide additional clarity when circumstances warrant. Unlike the Position Paper, the FAQs are not acted upon by the National Council and do not change the language, meaning or intent of the approved Position Paper.

1. VINCENTIANS HELP THOSE IN NEED. WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH THE ENVIRONMENT AND ECOLOGY?

For some of us, it may be difficult to make the connection between poverty and environmental concerns. However, think about some of the poor neighborhoods in your area. Are they close to industrial areas, landfills, or highways?

The American Lung Association reports:

“The burden of air pollution is not evenly shared. Poorer people, and some racial and ethnic groups, are among those who often face higher exposure to pollutants and who may experience greater responses to such pollution.” (See <http://www.lung.org/our-initiatives/healthy-air/outdoor/air-pollution/disparities.html>).

This web site also notes a number of studies that link socioeconomic status to greater exposure to pollutants leading to illness and higher risk of premature death.

As a Church of Life we not only need to continue to offer spiritual, financial, and nutritional assistance to those in need, we must help mitigate some of the impacts that their economic situation causes for them and their children.

Various studies and commentators, including Pope Francis, have observed that climate change disproportionately affects the lives of the poor – in ways sometimes subtle and at other times flagrant.

2. IT SEEMS THAT SO MUCH OF THE SCIENCE IS IN DISPUTE. WHAT IS THE TRUTH?

While there is an abundance of research which documents changes to greenhouse gases, temperature, and subsequent sea level rise, there are many strongly held, but seemingly opposing, views of the causes. Our position, offered in this paper, is not to delve into this debate about whether these changes are manmade or cyclical. It is simply to remind ourselves, and other faith organizations, that there are things that we can do to lessen the impact those conditions have on poor and vulnerable people and families.

3. WHAT TYPE OF IMPACT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?

First, there are three broad reasons why (environmental) disparities may exist, according to The American Lung Association:

- i. “Groups may face greater exposure to pollution because of housing market dynamics and land costs. For example, pollution sources may be located near disadvantaged communities, increasing exposure to harmful pollutants.
- ii. Low social position may make some groups more susceptible to health threats because of lack of access to health care, grocery stores and good jobs; poorer job opportunities; dirtier workplaces or higher traffic exposure are among the factors that could handicap groups and increase the risk of harm.
- iii. Existing health conditions, behaviors, or traits may predispose some groups to greater risk. For example, diabetics are among the groups most at risk from air pollutants, and the elderly, African Americans, Mexican Americans and people living near a central city have higher incidence of diabetes”

These disparities manifest themselves in four main categories

- Access to Safe and Sufficient Safe Drinking Water

The Centers for Disease Control comments:

“Drinking water quality has a major influence on public health. Even in the United States, clean water is not always assured. About 13.1 million households in the United States obtain drinking water from private wells, while others obtain their drinking water from local springs, livestock water tanks, or from rainwater captured in cisterns. Little is known about the quality of water from these unregulated sources and the potential impact on human health.” (See <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/hsb/cwh/default.htm>)

A dramatic example is the 2014 water contamination incident in Flint, Michigan, a community of nearly 100,000 where 42% of the population live below the poverty line and more than half are African-American. A [2016 article, published in CityLab](#), presents a strong case that this is not an isolated incident but rather a continuation of a long history of “racial water woes” and other forms of environmental racism in the United States.

- Air Quality and Atmospheric pollutants which cause a broad spectrum of health hazards
- Lead Poisoning, which is especially dangerous to children and often found in dwellings rented or owned by those with low incomes.
- Waste Site Locations

Our own experience as Vincentians visiting the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalized in their homes and neighborhoods reinforces the truth of these observations. We often find the homes of the poor to be in neighborhoods to be devoid of public spaces; to be near polluting facilities like industrial plants, waste sites, and junk yards; and to be situated in areas of congested, seedy and unsightly commercial activity and chaotic traffic. Their dwellings are more likely to have lead exposures, unsanitary plumbing, faulty or inadequate electrical wiring, unreliable heating and cooling systems, faulty construction, and inadequate living space.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) uses the term “overburdened communities” to identify neighborhoods and communities who experience disproportionate impact of environmental concerns on citizens lives. In its “[Environmental Justice Strategic Plan for 2016-2020](#),” the EPA declares its intent to identify at least 100 such communities and then systematically work to ameliorate the effects of environmental degradation in those places

Independent academic research has similarly documented this phenomenon. One such study in early 2016 (see “[Linking ‘Toxic Outliers’ to Environmental Justice Communities](#)”) noted that its analysis of all permitted industrial facilities across the United States showed that “there exists a class of hyper-polluters – the worst-of-the-worst – that disproportionately expose communities of color and low income populations to chemical releases.”

EPA’s Definition of Overburdened Community

“Minority, low-income, tribal or indigenous populations or geographic locations in the United States that potential experience disproportionate environmental harms and risks. This disproportionality can be as a result of greater vulnerability to environmental hazards, lack of opportunity for public participation, or other factors. Increased vulnerability may be attributable to an accumulation of negative or lack of positive environmental, health, economic, or social conditions within these populations or places. The term describes situations where multiple factors, including both environmental and socio-economic stressors, may act cumulatively to affect health and the environment and contribute to persistent environmental health disparities.”

4. WE HAVE BEEN TALKING AND DOING A LOT ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS OVER THE PAST 40 YEARS. HAS THAT HELPED?

There has been significant progress made in addressing environmental pollution, such as air quality, hazardous waste management, site remediation, and wastewater treatment. It is exactly that progress that gives encouragement that we can continue to make mitigate the potential harm from hazards to those in need.

5. WHAT DOES OUR FAITH OFFER IN THIS AREA?

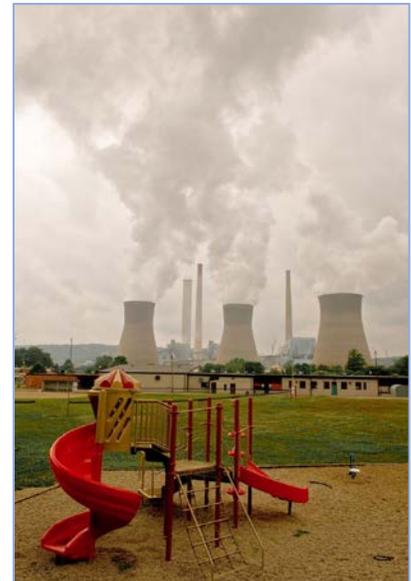
Pope Francis, Saint John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and bishops from around the world have recognized environmental stewardship as a moral issue and called on humanity to take action. In addition, Pope Francis, Saint John Paul II, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, and the U.S. bishops cast care for creation as a pro-life issue. To more fully understand our faith tradition in light of the science of global warming, [consult the excellent resource list on Catholic Teaching on Climate Change](#) at the Catholic Climate Covenant Website.

Pope Francis personalizes this notion in *Laudato Si'* by offering concrete examples of a concept he calls "Integral Ecology" (Chapter 4), a key part of which is the "Ecology of Daily Life" (Chapter 4, Section III)

The Pope begins by observing that "[r]ecognizing the reasons why given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the way it grasps reality."

Francis then links the fundamental and long-standing Catholic Social Teaching principle about the inherent dignity of each individual with what he calls "authentic development." For such development to be realized, as Catholics and as a society responsive and committed to the common good, we must take actions "to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life, and this entails considering the setting in which people live their lives." This is Francis's Ecology of Daily Life. His examples include:

- Urban areas lacking open areas and recreational and leisure opportunities, thereby fostering daily overcrowding and social anonymity
- Buildings, dwellings, neighborhoods, and public spaces so poorly designed and built that they depress the human spirit and make it difficult for people to interact in a positive way
- Inadequate public transportation systems which pollute, are in dilapidated condition robbing riders of dignity, are unsafe, and are unreliable for travel to work, shopping and medical appointments



- Common areas which lack “visual landmarks and urban landscapes which increase our sense of belonging, or rootedness, of feeling ‘at home’”...
- Housing that is run-down and unsanitary, stripping a person of their sense of “personal dignity.”

6. WHAT CAN WE DO ON A PERSONAL LEVEL?

Individual action is an important, significant step.

- ✓ **Reusing** items rather than throwing them into the trash is a practical way to extend the life of many good quality items. Clothes or furniture that you no longer want can be given to family, friends or our St. Vincent de Paul Society thrift stores and be used happily by new owners. Plastic bags can be reused to wrap food or items for storage. If you are creative, many things can find new life rather than clog up landfill sites.
- ✓ **Recycling** is the way of the future. Items such as soda cans, glass bottles and printed paper that cannot be reused as they are can be recycled. It is both environmentally beneficial and economical to melt down aluminum cans and glass bottles to make them into new beverage containers. The recycling industry also has the potential to create new jobs for people to sort and redirect recyclable materials. If your community does not collect vegetable matter, start a campaign to advocate for this program. This is a great way to engage youth and young people in a conference.
- ✓ **Consuming less** and living simply has been a Christian value from the beginning. Sacred Scripture tells us that the disciples were sent out to preach the Gospel with only the clothes on their backs. We can be spiritually, financially and emotionally encumbered by the desire for novelty and too many possessions. Having too many things can distract us from the important issues in life. A rich life in the fullest Christian sense does not depend on possessions.
- ✓ **Adjust our practices.** Can we reduce our consumption of fossil fuels by lowering our thermostats or raising the temperature on our air conditioners? Could we walk or take public transportation rather than use our cars for every trip? Become an advocate for new and more efficient energy technologies.

Each of us live in several communities: our families, our neighborhoods, our parishes and our workplaces. We can be leaders in environmental stewardship by living mindfully and showing people in our communities that saving the planet begins with individual choices. We can also keep learning and advocate for innovations that will benefit our planet.