

Assembly 14 December 2009

Global Citizens

I am sure you are aware that there is a major conference taking place in Copenhagen. A gathering of negotiators from almost 200 countries has been meeting in the capital city of Denmark and discussing the issue of World Climate and in particular carbon emissions. The conference is scheduled to last two weeks and will see many of the world's leaders join the negotiators this Thursday and Friday.

Undoubtedly, the topic being discussed is one of the most important problems facing the world today and a key issue for years to come, that is, global warming. It is a topic that will impact every one of you and will remain a key issue for the remainder of your lives.

The Copenhagen conference is an event you ought to be following. We talk often about St. Paul's students learning the skills necessary in order to take their place as global citizens. I can think of no better starting point in becoming a global citizen than to engage in the debate on global warming.

A global citizen is somebody who is concerned for other human beings regardless of their nationality, race or religion. It means being concerned for those who are living in poverty or are being persecuted. A global citizen is also somebody who is concerned about their environment and the health of our planet.

The first week of the Copenhagen conference has shown that there are deep divisions between countries in terms of the direction we need to take. All governments would agree that every human being is entitled to clean water and clean air. The divisions arise when nations talk about how this can be achieved.

A significant split has emerged between countries in the developed world and nations in the developing world. The developed world, dominated by countries in Europe and North America, has been for the past two to three centuries, the main contributor to carbon emissions. Its demand for industrial and agricultural products has led to the steady growth of greenhouse gases and environmental decline. The emerging economies in the developing world, particularly China, India, Brazil and Indonesia, have added more recently to the growth in carbon emissions. Many governments in the developed world take the view that emission limits should be placed on these new economies, particularly China and India. In contrast, countries in the developing world see it as their right to develop their industries and consider the position of the developed world to be somewhat hypocritical.

The place of China as a world industrial power is interesting. Many at the Copenhagen conference have been arguing that China is not a developing economy at all but a nation on the verge of joining the developed world. What is not in dispute, however, is that Chinese industry today is adding to the world's total carbon emissions at an alarming rate.

The hard task for negotiators is to find solutions that will reduce total carbon emissions not only in China but also in the USA, Europe and around the world.

Copenhagen has allowed the voices of small nations to be heard. Nations that will suffer first from the effects of global warming are the low-lying countries in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. A rising sea-level, brought on by the melting of Arctic and Antarctic ice, will result in the submergence of those nations and the relocation of their populations. Understandably, these island communities see the fault for their predicament resting squarely on the shoulders of the industrial world, be they developed or developing countries.

Also meeting in Copenhagen are people who question whether Man has contributed at all to global warming. Their view is that the Earth has always experienced cycles of heating and cooling and that the current rise in global temperatures is simply a reflection of those cycles. Known in the media as 'climate skeptics' their voice should also be heard.

Demonstrating in Copenhagen are many thousands of concerned people who want to ensure that governments are hearing the views of the common person. Similar demonstrations are being held around the world. A disturbing feature of these demonstrations, however, is the minority who wish to engage in acts of violence to suit their particular points of view.

Later this week, more than 100 world leaders will arrive in Copenhagen to join the discussions. It is not possible to predict what will be the outcome of this conference. What is certain is that the success of the Copenhagen conference will depend largely on the positions taken by two countries, the USA and China. By the time we gather for next Monday's assembly, the path forward might be a little clearer.

I said earlier that a global citizen is somebody who is concerned for other human beings. I encourage each of you take a close interest in what is happening in Copenhagen and to develop a position on carbon emissions and global warming. In order to do this, you must be well-informed. Watch the television, go on-line and read the newspapers this week.

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