

The Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill: A CST Perspective

During the last month, the drama of the BP oil spill has been played out in ongoing news reports. Latest reports are that much more oil has been continuing to spill into the Gulf of Mexico than the British Petroleum Company has been willing to acknowledge. Plumes of oil are moving underwater as well as on the Gulf's surface over at least a 30 mile area, and the spill may threaten a much larger area as the leak continues to spew oil. All attempts to shut it down have failed. Catholic Bishops in the Gulf area voice their concern on the damage being done to God's Creation and move into action to help workers impacted by the spill.

Basic Facts

On April 20, 2010, an explosion and fire on Transocean Ltd's drilling rig Deepwater Horizon, licensed to British Petroleum, killed 11 workers. The rig was drilling 42 miles southeast of Venice, Louisiana, beneath about 5,000 feet of water and 13,000 feet under the seabed. (See the following for a visual diagram account of what: http://media.nola.com/news_impact/other/oil-cause050710.pdf)

President Obama pledges "every single available resource," including the U.S. military, to contain the spreading spill. Obama also says BP is responsible for the cleanup. Offshore drilling permits are frozen.

Louisiana declared state of emergency due to the threat to the state's natural resources in late April. British Petroleum executives appear before Congress in May and hesitate to take full responsibility for the spill. Their numbers on the oil spilling into the conflict with other reports. All their efforts at containment of the spill fail.

Since May 1, more than 5000 people impacted by the Gulf oil spill have received assistance through

Over the past weeks we have learned of the growing seriousness of the oil spill off the Louisiana coast. This accident is seriously impacting the Gulf ecosystem, the wetlands and wildlife of the Gulf coast, and the livelihoods of thousands of people. We do not know the extent of damage and the long-term consequences, but it is clear that the effects will be very extensive. We must pray to God for relief, help those already impacted, and ask for accountability from those responsible for this tragedy.

-Bishop Michael Jarrell of Lafayette, Louisiana,
May 2010



A picture of the Gulf oil spill at the source of the leak. AP Photo



Catholic Charities in the Archdiocese of New Orleans. Four emergency relief centers have been established where fishers can receive emergency food, case management, crisis counseling and other services. The archdiocese said more than 1,382 families have received emergency assistance from Catholic Charities related to the oil spill.

The U.S. Weather Service has predicted a heavy storm and hurricane season starting this summer, and there is concern that high winds may move the oil in unexpected ways and in different directions.

The Gulf Oil spill is called the world's greatest oil disaster, and the possible damage to the environment and to those who live and work on gulf is beginning to be predicted as catastrophic.

Care for Creation, Corporate and Governmental Responsibility, and The Common Good

From the perspective of Catholic social teaching (CST), several core CST principles are relevant to this growing disaster. The following quotes from the U.S. Catholic Bishops raise questions that all people of faith are called to reflect on as the tragedy continues to play out. We all have the obligation not only to see, but also to reflect and act; our faith calls us to respond to this disaster on several levels.

Reflection from the U.S. Bishops

As Catholic bishops, we seek to offer a distinctively religious and moral perspective to what is necessarily a complicated scientific, economic, and political discussion. Ethical questions lie at the heart of the challenges facing us. John Paul II insists, "We face a fundamental question which can be described as both ethical and ecological. How can accelerated development be prevented from turning against man? How can one prevent disasters that destroy the environment and

threaten all forms of life, and how can the negative consequences that have already occurred be remedied?" Because of the blessings God has bestowed on our nation and the power it possesses, the United States bears a special responsibility in its stewardship of God's creation. . .

--US Catholic Bishops, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, 2001, #5

Questions:

- Why should people of faith take a moral perspective on all forms of economic development?
- How can we conduct a discussion that takes into account science, economics, business and politics and still has a moral component?
- How do we prioritize the different interests involved?
- How do we balance the right to profit with the common good of all?
- In what way could the Gulf spill be described as "accelerated development" that has turned against humans—and the environment?
- Should our nation be more proactive in limiting future environmental disasters? How would we do so?
- What should be the role of the government in such a future scenario? What should be the role of informed citizens? The role of corporations?
- Who should monitor corporate accountability? (Part of the problem today is the "revolving door" process in federal agencies which have oversight of business and public safety: many of the government officials in these agencies come from the industries they are supposed to monitor, and often go back to high-paying positions in these industries when they leave the government. How should this practice be rethought?)



Reflection from the Vatican's Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church:

The tendency towards an “ill-considered” exploitation of the resources of creation is the result of a long historical and cultural process. “The modern era has witnessed man's growing capacity for transformative intervention. The aspect of the conquest and exploitation of resources has become predominant and invasive, and today it has even reached the point of threatening the environment's hospitable aspect: the environment as ‘resource’ risks threatening the environment as ‘home’. Because of the powerful means of transformation offered by technological civilization, it sometimes seems that the balance between man and the environment has reached a critical point” #461

Nature appears as an instrument in the hands of man, a reality that he must constantly manipulate, especially by means of technology. A reductionist conception quickly spread, starting from the presupposition — which was seen to be erroneous — that an infinite quantity of energy and resources are available, that it is possible to renew them quickly, and that the negative effects of the exploitation of the natural order can be easily absorbed. This reductionist conception views the natural world in mechanistic terms and sees development in terms of consumerism. Primacy is given to doing and having rather than to being, and this causes serious forms of human alienation. #462

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

- Why did humans embark on the “long historical and cultural process” of subduing Creation for their own goals?
- Can you think of any past situations that exemplify points of this process?
- Why does the Church challenge us to think of the environment as “home” rather than as “resource?”
- Has the balance between humans and the environment reached a critical point? Discuss.
- What connections does the social teaching of the Church make between environmental destruction and consumerism?
- Does such a connection have something to do with the present BP oil spill tragedy?
- How does human alienation result from the wrong use of technology and natural resources?
- What are people of faith called to do when faced with all the consequences of consumerism?
- How can we respond?

Action:

Donate to Catholic Charities in the dioceses in the Gulf area to help families impacted by the spill. Go to:

- Archdiocese of New Orleans: (<http://www.ccano.org/>)
- Diocese of Lafayette Louisiana: (<http://www.diolaf.org/>)
- Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux: (<http://www.htdiocese.org/>)
- Diocese of Biloxi, Mississippi: (<http://www.biloxidiocese.org/>)

Write to your elected officials to convey your distress about this tragedy and to demand responsible and accountable oversight of oil corporations and other industries whose procedures and/or products can harm our people and our environment. Demand the “revolving door” between industries and government agencies be closed; former and future corporate employees should not monitor their own industries.

Prayer:

Creator God, you have given us the great and gracious gift of the natural world to be our home. Forgive us for the lack of respect we have shown this gift, for our greed and our turning from the common good. We ask that you help us to respond to the tragedy in the Gulf as concerned citizens, as people of faith who want to cherish your Creation, and as brothers and sisters to those whose livelihoods are being destroyed as the waters of the Gulf are being contaminated. May this tragedy be a call to us that we can no longer ignore, and may we be renewed in our efforts to promote the common good and to respect the integrity of Creation.

