



## Fossil Fuels

**Catherine Devitt**, environmental justice officer at the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, highlights the moral obligation we have to quickly move away from fossil fuels to a low carbon economy.

Fossil fuels – coal, oil, gas – play a dominant role in global energy systems. Fossil energy was a fundamental driver of the Industrial Revolution, and the technological, social, economic and developmental change that has followed. Many of our everyday behaviours, and many of the everyday products that we consume are linked to fossil fuels and fossil fuel energy.

There are significant environmental and social risks, however, as the concentration of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere – most originating from the burning of fossil fuels – is on a pathway towards exceeding safe limits. The result – climate change – is the altering of the earth's climate due to human activity. Backed up by solid scientific consensus, we now know that we are experiencing an alarming warming of the earth's system, causing extreme weather events, global sea rise and population displacement.

The implications are multiple and far-reaching. We know that people in poverty and those who are already vulnerable will be hardest hit. There is now scientific agreement that we need to leave at least eighty per cent of all known fossil fuel reserves untouched, in the ground, if we want

to prevent significant climate change. An economic model centred on the intensive use of fossil fuels exacerbates this challenge. Today's environmental challenges reflect a way of doing things that is no longer socially and ecologically sustainable. We need to tell ourselves a new story.

There is now a considerable moral obligation on the global population to quickly move away from fossil fuels to a low carbon economy. The transition involves shifting towards more efficient ways of production, improving energy efficiency in our homes, for example, and generating electricity from renewable sources, such as wind, solar and tidal energy. Because fossil fuels are so deeply embedded in our everyday lives, there is also need to look at how we can reduce consumption, and extend the life span of everyday household items. A change in lifestyle is needed, a change in how and what we produce and consume.

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reminds us that 'the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all' (LS, 23). Improving and sustaining human wellbeing, while at the same time protecting the environment, means that we must rethink how we produce and use



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energy. There remains an obvious responsibility on individuals to reduce the emissions related to their own consumption choices, and most importantly, to demand that our political representatives put policies in place that help us move away from fossil fuel consumption and that urgently reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

But, perhaps we need to do more. We need to balance our view of the world as a collection of means for meeting our ends with remembering that the earth is also a manifestation of God's creation. In the transformation towards caring for our common home, there are a number of important questions to ask ourselves: How can we live in such a way that ensures environmental protection and promotes social equality? How can we create an awareness of our own

humble position within a much larger planetary community? How can we start to see environmental problems, not as single issues, but as part of a much broader question for social justice?

A key feature of *Laudato Si'* is the concept of 'integral ecology' – a recognition of the connection between the economic, social and environmental crises confronting humanity. Pope Francis proposes integral ecology as an appropriate lens through which to understand and respond to the challenges facing the world. By taking this approach, we can acknowledge that the environmental issues confronting the world are, in fact, symptoms of deeply ingrained injustices. Unless these root causes are addressed, social and environmental injustice will continue to unfold. ♡