



Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change

Delivering a Message of Climate Urgency to the Pope

With a great investment of time and effort, I went off to my audience with Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday, November 25th. I had come all the way from the UN climate talks in Bangkok, Thailand, stopping at home barely long enough to kiss my wife and do my laundry, then continuing on to Copenhagen, site of the final climate negotiations for 2009, an event of immense importance for the survival of humanity. I had with me a handwritten personal invitation to the pontiff from Yvo de Boer, the head of the UN Climate Secretariat, obtained in the final minutes of the Bangkok talks, inviting the Pope to come to Copenhagen. My intention in obtaining that invitation and delivering it to the Pope in person was to influence the outcome of those talks by focusing the attention of the leader of the most wide-spread religion on Earth at the UN climate negotiations and the attempt to produce a treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by which humanity might survive.

Not wanting to just show up unannounced, I had sent word to the Vatican through five different channels, including Monsignors and Archbishops, representatives of the Papal Nuncios in Bangkok, Bonn, and Barcelona.

I had received confirmation through the UN climate secretariat that the Vatican knew I was coming. I was trying to accomplish the impossible – to speak to the Pope in person, to beg him to come to Copenhagen or send a high level emissary, to take a strong and urgent stance on climate, and to have him to join with the Dalai Lama and other heads of religions in a ‘religious climate summit’ in 2010.

I went to Rome by way of Assisi, Italy, the home of Saint Clare and Saint Francis, perhaps Christianity’s greatest saint, patron of the environment, a man so in tune with nature that a flock of birds are said to have held perfectly still while he spoke to them of God, until he

finished and bid them farewell. I had made a pilgrimage to Assisi to absorb the sacred energy of that ancient holy hilltop city, its shrines and relics, the spiritual energy of the worship of millions of people over the centuries, the reverence that is almost palpable in the streets and stones of its churches, walls and cobblestones. Being in Assisi, I felt as though I had come home. I wept when I left for the Vatican.

From Assisi I travelled on directly to the Vatican. Not knowing how one gets an audience with the Pope I went first to the headquarters of the Order of St. Francis, with whom I had felt such a strong mystical connection. There I met with Father Peter Damian Massengil, who heard me out and prepared a very touching letter of introduction to the Vatican for me. I realized that my task was to find and unlock the right doors to achieve my ultimate goals. My first goal was to bring the Pope to the Copenhagen climate talks or have him send a high level emissary. The second was to influence the Papal Encyclical being prepared for the Pope to deliver on January 1st of the New Year. The third was to invite the Pope to participate in a signing ceremony for the **Interfaith Declaration on Climate Change** along with the Dalai Lama, who’s secretary had already indicated some interest in participation if the Pope and/or other head clerics of the world’s major religions agreed to attend.



With the aid of Fr. Peter Damian's wonderful letter, I was successful in finding and passing through the metaphorical series of doors, and at last found myself in the *Prefecture of the Papal Household*. There I was granted an invitation to a Papal audience the following Wednesday. I had planned only a week's diversion from my preparations for Interfaith Declaration events in Copenhagen. Now that had expanded to two weeks.



But the possibility of bringing the Pope to Copenhagen, to a 'religious climate summit' in 2010, and of influencing the papal encyclical for the New Year were far too significant to ignore. I spent the extra week absorbing the inspiration of history, religion and art, and at work on the Internet until the wee hours of the mornings.

Two days before the audience I realized how wonderful it would be to take letters and notes to the Pope from people around the world, expressing the urgency of the climate crisis and asking him to come to Copenhagen. I put out a call to contacts within the *Youth Constituency* to the UN Climate Talks, as well as to *Avaaz*, the renowned online force of ethical and environmental conscience. Within 36 hours I had collected over 300 letters and notes. I placed what I judged to be the best ones on top, and packed them all neatly into the cloth tote bag on which Yvo de Boer had written his invitation to the Pope.

Wednesday morning arrived, and I was at the Vatican an hour earlier than the invitation indicated. Naively thinking that this audience would be attended by a small, manageable number of people, I had prepared a few digital slides of the most unsettling current signs of *runaway climate change* to share with the Pope. The audience was perhaps manageable, but nothing about it was small. A crowd of hundreds of people streamed through metal detectors and filed into the Vatican auditorium. But alas, my ticket did not allow me access to the 'inner sanctum', the first three rows of seats, which were cordoned off for a few special guests.

Finally encountering a door I could not pass through, instead I created one final window. I passionately discussed my mission with a Vatican official, telling him the precious package of messages I had brought for the Pope. Having done my homework, I mentioned Archbishop James Harvey by name, and saw to it that my package would be delivered to him. He is literally the Pope's right hand man, sitting at the right arm of the pontiff at public occasions. Thus the pleas, prayers and precautionary tales of hundreds of concerned people from around the world, enclosed in Yvo de Boer's own personal invitation, were entrusted to the *Prefect of the Papal Household*. If the Pope holds the keys to the Catholic Church, Archbishop James Harvey holds the keys of access to the Pope.



My charge had been safely delivered to a man with unique access to the Pope. I could then relax and enjoy the papal audience, a demonstration of the Pope's multilingual capabilities, a ritual of pomp and circumstance, an outpouring of loyalty and the exuberance of Catholics and the curious from around the world. It was not the spiritually inspiring experience that my pilgrimage to Assisi had been. But I'm not sure papal audiences are meant to be that. They are public rituals of enthusiasm and joy for the leader of a church founded upon the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, who lived and died over 2000 years ago. My aim had been to engage the leadership of the Catholic Church, with its influential religious and political world presence,

to help reach a treaty by which humanity and life on Earth might survive the *climate crisis* that is occurring. My goal of delivering the message to this 'trusted messenger' had been achieved.