

More Supply or Less Demand?

by Fr. John S. Rausch

With the recent spike in gasoline prices, politicians and pundits have begun calling again for energy independence for America. Ethanol refiners continue lobbying Congress for massive subsidies, while electric utilities and coal producers promote clean coal and a nuclear renaissance. Oil executives complaining that U.S. restrictions have hampered developing new sources of oil, advocate opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling. “Energy independence” has morphed into code for “drill it all, dig it all and double it all.” For the present, traditional forms of energy are needed to find the glide path into the terrain of alternative energy sources, yet in the future, the emphasis cannot rest solely on supply.

People of faith recognize the market functions by supply *and demand*, and now, at least in the near term, some demands appear unsustainable and too costly for the common good. To produce enough ethanol to fill one tank of gas in an SUV takes 450 pounds of corn. To supply all U.S. gasoline through ethanol would require planting 71 percent of American farmland in fuel crops.

In 1950 a single family car might be parked near a house averaging 1,100 square feet, but in 2005 probably several cars would stand in driveways of houses that doubled to 2,340 square feet with fewer occupants and lots more space to heat and cool. Currently, the U.S. with less than 5 percent of the world’s population uses one third of the world’s electricity produced annually. With drained wetlands, clear-cut forests and paved-over top soil the capacity of the planet to carry life is rapidly being exhausted by human habits and lifestyles.

If energy were the coin of the realm, that coin would have two worn sides: first, the problems associated with global warming, and second, the challenges posed by energy security.

Global warming could initiate a new sense of community among all countries, since “everyone lives down stream” of hostile climate change. About one hundred million people in the world live one meter above sea level. With increased global warming exacerbated by burning fossil fuels, the melting ice caps would inflict unimaginable flooding of these poor populations, plus introduce diseases previously unknown in temperate regions.

Known world petroleum reserves will last 80 to 100 years, natural gas 70 to 90 years. The geopolitical imperatives to secure control of energy resources mount. Question: was the invasion of Iraq more about weapons of mass destruction or controlling the oil supply? People of faith see a simpler lifestyle and a more intentional use of resources as an essential component of peace building.

Pope Benedict XVI in his 2008 World Day of Peace Message said, “We need to care for the environment: It has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion.” The “good of all” extends to succeeding generations who equally deserve a healthy, and not degraded, earth.

Two approaches make sense. First, mount intense and massive national investment on the scale of the moon race to develop renewables (solar, wind, geothermal,

biomass, etc.) and high-tech energy (hydrogen-generated power, fuel cells, nuclear fusion, etc.).

Second, adopt an ethic of “less and local” to address the short term urgency. More oil can be “found” in Detroit by designing more fuel-efficient cars than from ANWR. More electricity can be “generated” from retrofitting homes with better insulation than from another coal-fired plant.

A new energy consciousness begins with numerous personal choices that collectively grow into the political will to change.