

Why Will We Risk Getting Arrested?



On Monday, August 29, two Franciscan friars from the Holy Name Province – Jacek Orzechowski and Erick López – will join a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim faith leaders in a gathering in front of the White House for prayer and ongoing sit-ins to defuse the largest carbon bomb in North America. This event is part of a larger mobilization effort called forth by leading environmental groups, climate scientists, and faith-based groups to put pressure on the Obama Administration to block the Keystone XL Pipeline. This project would connect Canadian tar sands – containing the second largest and dirtiest oil reserves on the planet – with oil refineries in Texas. It would pave the way for a massive expansion of the destructive tar sands operations and, in terms of global climate change, push human civilization over a cliff. Fr. Jacek and Fr. Erick share their motivations for this action in the following reflection.

Over 1,800 people already have registered to join a massive, sustained sit-in at the White House between August 20 and September 3, and risk arrest. Among them are Dr. James Hansen of NASA’s Goddard Space Center; Gus Speth of the National Resources Defense Council; Wendell Berry, author and farmer; Tom Goldtooth of the Indigenous Environmental Network; Rabbi Arthur Waskow, founder and director of the Shalom Center; and Marie Dennis, co-president of Pax Christi International.

We too decided to join this group and risk getting arrested. To explain why we will take part in this action, and to respond to those who may claim that this is an inappropriate and radical thing for Franciscans to do, we are offering our short essay.

First, we would like to share with you basic information about the Keystone XL Pipeline and why, in the opinion of many top scientists, environmentalists and faith leaders, granting a presidential permit for construction of the Keystone XL pipeline would be disastrous for America and the world. Second, we will point out why our conscience, our Catholic faith and the Franciscan tradition compel us to stand up for life, climate justice, and risk arrest. Finally, we want to tell you why we think you too should consider joining this effort.

Why giving a permit for a construction of the Keystone XL pipeline must be opposed

The proposed pipeline could carry, each day, as much as 900,000 barrels of the highly toxic tar sand oil across the American agricultural heartland, passing over the Ogallala Aquifer. As the second largest aquifer in the world, it serves as the primary source of drinking water for millions of Americans and provides 30 percent of the nation's ground water used for irrigation. The likely pipeline leaks and accidents would have devastating effects on the American people and environment.

The recent horrendous BP oil spill in the Gulf, as well the spilling of Canada's tars sands oil into Michigan's Kalamazoo River and a Chicago suburb only highlight the enormous risk of the Keystone XL Pipeline. These and other instances of environmental damage make the claims of the Big Oil industry that it's "all safe" ring hollow and warrant extra caution on the part of the public.

While the private corporations often reap enormous financial gains from risky investments, when a financial or ecological disaster strikes, all too often, it is the public that that ends up paying for losses.

However, as important as the safety concerns over the pipeline are, there are even more important reasons why we plan to join some of the top climate scientists, major environmental groups and many faith leaders in appealing to the Obama Administration not to grant a presidential permit for a construction of the Keystone XL Pipeline.

Building the pipeline from Alberta to Texas will perpetuate our deadly addiction to oil, tip much further the ecological balance of our planet, radically threaten the food security of the world, and undermine clean energy alternatives.

Thousands of reputable scientists and the most prestigious bodies in the world are sounding alarm that we are on the cusp of radical and irreversible changes to the planet's atmosphere due to our burning of fossil fuels. They stress that if human beings want to avert catastrophe, we must make huge and quick reductions in the emission of greenhouse gases.

As the historical leader in greenhouse emissions, the U.S. must reach an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2050. President Obama's efforts to impose higher fuel efficiency standards will help to make significant progress in reducing greenhouse emission in our country. However, these gains would be eroded – if not reversed – by the impact of the Keystone XL Pipeline pumping a heavy crude oil with a high life cycle carbon content. And there is enough carbon in Alberta's tar sands to raise the concentration of carbon in our planet's atmosphere by about 200 parts per million. In other words, the tar sands operation will push us over a cliff and there will be nothing to stop our fall.

Let's pause for a moment and reflect on what these numbers mean.

Consider the words of Jim Hansen from NASA, widely considered to be one of the most reputable climate scientists in the world:

"If humanity wishes to preserve a planet similar to that on which civilization developed and to which life on Earth has adapted, paleoclimate evidence and ongoing climate change suggests that CO2 will need to be reduced from its current 385 ppm to at most 350 ppm... If the present overshoot of this target CO2 is not brief, there is a possibility of seeding irreversible catastrophic effects."

Hansen also said that, if the tar sands get fully developed, "it is essentially 'game over'" for the climate. The last time in Earth's history when atmospheric CO2 was above 500 ppm was between 55 to 36 million years ago when palm trees flourished in Wyoming, crocodiles lived in the Arctic, Antarctica was a coniferous forest and sea level was at least 100 meters higher than today.

Given our current greenhouse gases emission trajectory, we are projected to reach 450 ppm by 2030 and as high as 780 ppm by the end of this century.

What is slowly unfolding is an unimaginable tragedy with a specter of massive starvation, forced migration of hundreds of millions of people, and political and economic shock waves capable of unraveling the very foundation of human civilization. This is not a Hollywood script penned to entertain people. It is a scenario for those who recognize God as the source of all truth and scientific method, and refuse to be bamboozled by the Big Oil and Coal industries and their climate change deniers.

Consider the likely impact of run-away climate change on food security. According to the seminal study from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, if atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations increase to a peak of 450-600 ppm over this century, we run the risk of transforming the American West into a permanent dust bowl.¹ Southern Europe, northern and southern Africa as well as Western Australia would share a similar fate.

A new study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science asserts that on the slowest of the IPCC warming scenarios, in which CO₂ is stabilized at around 560ppm, “corn and soy yields are predicated to decrease by 30-46% before the end of the century.”² On the highest and most rapid warming scenario, by the end of the century, corn and soy yields are predicted to decrease by 63-82%.

Bear in mind that because of fast population growth, and people in countries such as China eating more grain intensive meat products, the demand for corn and soybeans is expected to increase by 50% in the next 20 years.

There is more danger on the horizon. The Himalayas are home to the world’s largest sub-polar ice reserves. About 500 million people in China and India depend on the melt water from these enormous glaciers. These two most populous countries in the world presently are able to have two harvests a year, thanks to the pattern of seasonal, monsoonal rains and the irrigation that comes from the great rivers fed by the glaciers. However, the glaciers in the Himalayas are retreating at an accelerated rate.

Unless the human family acts decisively and with great speed in switching from dirty fossil fuels to green sources of energy, the great rivers in China and India will flow only in certain seasons and will no longer be able to be counted upon to support their current wheat harvests; production likely would be cut in half. In addition, with China being the number-one wheat producer in the world, followed by India and the U.S., the aggressive market competition for wheat likely would result in skyrocketing prices.

Unabated global climate change also will imperil the rice harvest in Asia. According to the most recent estimates, the most likely sea level rise could reach up to 6 feet by the end of the century. Even if the sea were to rise three feet, the rice harvest in Vietnam – the second largest exporter of that grain in the world – would be reduced by half.³ The increasing level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is also changing the chemistry of our oceans. Their acidification leads to bleaching of the coral reefs, nurseries for many species of fish. Plankton, which supports krill, whales, tuna and many fisheries, is also being affected by climate change. Consequently, the web of life in the oceans is unraveling, further reducing the food security of billions of people.

¹ Susan Solomon, Gian-Kasper Plattner, Reto Knutti, and Pierre Friedlingstein, “Irreversible Climate Change Due to Carbon Dioxide Emissions,” PNAS February, 2009. www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/01/28/0812721106.full.pdf+html

² Wolfram Schlenker and Michael J. Roberts, “Nonlinear Temperature Effects Indicate Severe Damages to U.S. Crop Yields Under Climate Change,” PNAS, September 2009. www.pnas.org/content/early/2009/08/25/0906865106.full.pdf+html

³ Lester R. Brown, *Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization*, 7. www.earth-policy.org/images/uploads/book_files/pb4book.pdf

Would Jesus say and do anything about climate change, the tar sands or the Keystone XL Pipeline? Judging from his parables, Jesus expressed God's love, compassion, and providence through the book of nature. Jesus spoke about proclaiming the Good News to the poor, opening the eyes of the blind, freeing the oppressed, healing the land, restoring justice and tasting the shalom of Eden throughout the Jubilee Year. Jesus spoke about the man beaten up by the robbers and left to die on the road to Jerusalem with the priest and Levite walking past him on the other side of the road. Stretching the hearts and minds of his listeners, making room for more life and compassion, warning about God's judgment of nations. Oh, Jesus would have so much to say about global climate change, or tar sands, wouldn't he?

And how to get Francis out of the birdbath into a sit-in at the White House? Would that be improper? Too controversial or divisive an act? The poor man of Assisi and his followers over the centuries would find Christ in the embrace of a leper, in the bustling city square, in the sweet smell of a forest on Mount La Verna where they would experience creation as a window to the divine. Practicing obedience, we try to listen and discern the voice of the Holy Spirit: within the fraternity and in silence; in the call for solidarity cried out by the powerless; in the voice of a scientist reminding us of our deep communion with all creation – and of God who makes all things new.

Unless our faith communities get interested and serious about helping to save our civilization and the life-support system of our planet, they risk losing their intellectual and moral credibility. Leaving the task of saving the human family from full-fledged climate change calamity to scientists and environmentalists would liken us to the priest and Levite from the Gospel. Too busy attending to “spiritual things,” they left the badly injured man at the side of the road to die.

For churches, synagogues and mosques to be serious about one of the most important tasks facing humanity, they must put aside the pretense of powerlessness. All too often, with great conviction and faith, we put the blame for our environmental woes on the materialism and consumerism of the dominant culture, on “big, greedy companies” or “corrupted, unprincipled politicians.” Too many times, we too have slipped into that blame mode, demanding change from others without assessing our own many and varied gifts and opportunities to act with the power of the Holy Spirit as prophets of hope.

We hope you will consider joining us on August 29th for the interfaith day of non-violent, peaceful action to oppose the Keystone XL Pipeline. (To register, go to: www.tarsandsaction.org/sign-up) If for whatever reason you are unable to participate on the 29th, you can do the following:

- 1) Pray for those directly participating directly in the non-violent witness.
- 2) Sign the on-line petition at <http://act.350.org/sign/tar-sands> and circulate it among your faith community and network of friends.
- 3) Spread the word out about the tar sands campaign using social media technology: www.franciscanaction.org

To echo the words spoken almost 800 years ago by St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology: “Let us begin again, for up to now we have done nothing.”

Peace and all good.

Fr. Jacek Orzechowski, OFM and Fr. Erick López, OFM