

A Faith Frame on Climate Disruption (unabridged)

interview with Jose Aguto

Jose Aguto is the Legislative Secretary for Sustainable Energy and the Environment with Friends Committee on National Legislation. He spoke with Western Friend by phone on April 20, 2015. The following text was excerpted from an edited transcript of that conversation.

Western Friend: Would you start by sharing how you came to your current position with FCNL?

Jose Aguto: Sure. My second day of law school, I realized I really didn't like it. But I wanted to make use of it. So I asked myself the question, "Which peoples have been most abused by the rule of law or the lack of application of the rule of law?" Although there are many worthy answers to that question, my answer was Native Americans. So I focused on serving Native Americans. I literally just wrote a bunch of letters to reservations and asked them if they would take me on as a legal intern. The first year was Lummi Indian nation in Bellingham, WA and the second year was with the Oglala Lakota Nation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. I was continually learning about the systemic abuse of the rule of law by the federal government. Through that work, I also came to appreciate how some tribal peoples don't make distinctions between the human world and the natural world. As one elder said to me, "They are *not* natural resources, they are our relatives." A few years later, I worked for EPA's American Indian Environmental Office and the National Congress of American Indians. Then a friend told me about a position opening at FCNL. I applied and was blessed to be accepted, which by God's grace seems to be a natural progression in both my professional development and my spiritual development as a Catholic.

WF: Isn't it amazing looking back sometimes? How it all sort of comes to now.

JA: Yes, yes, really. And that's something you see with a lot of indigenous people, too, that mixing of roles. A person could be a shaman and a tribal administrator and a mother of four children, and when you talk to her, you're talking on all those levels simultaneously. You're having a conversation, and it isn't just about being a bureaucrat, or just about Native American spirituality, or about a child's basketball game. It all flows together in completeness, a natural melding together.

WF: What a wonderful experience for you . . . Are you still a practicing Catholic?

JA: Yes, in a way. I came back to my faith through the Desert Fathers. As you may know, after Christ was crucified, there was centuries of repression of Christians, and then Emperor Constantine found Christianity to be acceptable and developed a kind of state-sponsored religion. With that melding of church and state, there was an elaboration and growth of the Catholic Church in ways that a lot of people were offended by – including the Desert Fathers and Mothers, who then literally fled to the deserts of Syria and Egypt where they formed the first monastic communities. This became the Christian Monastic tradition, founded by Saint Anthony the Great. That return to simplicity is the tradition that attracted me back to Catholicism – the simple side, the pure side, the essence of what it means to be a Christian. That essence is, of course, the essence of all religions, according to Thomas Merton. I've heard it said that if you put a rabbi, an imam, and a priest in a room together, they're inevitably going to start arguing. But if you put a Sufi mystic, a Buddhist monk, and a Christian monk in a room together, they look each other in the eye and smile.

WF: I haven't heard that before, it's wonderful.

JA: So that is where I'm coming from. And Quakers, of course, live this every day. There isn't a separation between laity and priests. It's just who you are.

WF: What is your current legislative agenda right now, and your public awareness agenda?

JA: There currently is no legislation in Congress that is both meaningful and politically viable to address climate change. Because of the current level of partisanship around this issue, some advocates actually avoid mentioning the phrase, "climate change." But as Joe Volk says, "There's no elegant solution to an ill-defined problem." So FCNL's primary focus now is on the "Call to Conscious on Climate Disruption," which is a moral call to Congress to acknowledge in a bipartisan fashion the science and human causality of climate change – and a call to commit to action on that basis. The faith community needs to be a bridge to bring people together. This work has to be a grass roots effort, not a Hill game. Just like other social movements, like the Civil Rights Movement, the Climate Change Movement requires a moral foundation. An environmentalist once told me, "I really wish the faith community would stop acting like policy wonks and start speaking instead from the moral and faith frame – from where they are." And so FCNL started to embrace that. We also realized that we need Republicans to be a part of this conversation. Most Republican legislators privately acknowledge the science and reality of climate change, but they feel they don't have the political cover or moral backing to speak publicly about it. The faith community's support would, if you will, help them come out of the closet.

We initially faced a lot of skepticism about this strategy. Some of our allies said, "What? Just talk to our representatives about acknowledging climate change? That's just a resolution,

not even a bill. How can we lobby on that?" I respect that. Trying to issue a moral call when real-life battles and impacts are happening – the Keystone pipeline, EPA's Clean Power Plan, desertification – it's a huge challenge. But for this Call to be effective, we have to hold back from talking about policy prescriptions, because a policy conversation immediately steers a legislator away from the fundamental acknowledgement about the reality of climate change. And that's the first essential step: you cannot solve a problem until you first admit to it. As things stand now, well-meaning people on both sides of the aisle are having really tortured conversations, trying to draft legislation that tires to address climate change without talking about it. These kinds of tortured intellectual exercises will get us some modest pieces of legislation, but they will never get us kind of legislation we really need to prevent the catastrophes that we are creating.

WF: Can you talk about what happened in 2009 around climate change legislation? I know there was a progressive bill that failed, but I didn't track what happened that closely.

JA: In 2007, Nancy Pelosi and Newt Gingrich sat on a couch together for a public service announcement, saying climate change is the greatest threat facing humanity today. With bipartisan recognition of the dangers of climate change, many pieces of legislation were proposed. The bill that passed the House was called the Waxman Markey Bill or the American Clean Energy and Security Act. Its goal was an 80% reduction in national green house gas emissions by the year 2050. But the fossil fuel industry woke up and realized this was a threat to their very existence. So they came in heavy and strong in 2009, and near the end of the negotiations in the House, many compromises were made, and the bill barely passed. Once it got to the Senate, it was pretty much dead on arrival. By that time, the fossil fuel industry was out-lobbying the climate community something like 8 to 1.

WF: When you imagine a way forward that seems plausible in regard to the influence of the petroleum industry and international capital, how do you think about ways around that?

JA: One answer comes from Bill Moyers, "The only antidote to organized money is organized people." The U.S. is still potentially the greatest democracy in the world, should people choose to exercise our democratic power. We have the ability to talk to our legislators face-to-face and express our opinions, without fear of the kind of retribution that happens in many countries across the world; this motivates us at FCNL to engage more people more deeply in this process. If constituents are not in the halls of Congress, those halls will continue to be filled by other interests.

This is how we can recover our democracy. A survey of 260 congressional staffers found that the most effective way to persuade a legislator who is on the fence on an issue is for a constituent to meet with the legislator face-to-face – by far, the number-one, most effective

strategy. Contrary to what most people think about their legislators, most of them come to this with a good heart, and they actually want to hear from their constituents. Many of them feel right after the election that they are abandoned – because a lot of citizens don't realize is that continual engagement is really important.

WF: I think that's an important point to help people understand – that they are authorized to go have those conversations.

JA: They have more than authorized. This is democracy. Our politicians are public servants by definition. They ought to be positioned to serve the public, and we ought explain to them what we need.

WF: So how do you imagine change actually happening? What do you see as being plausible?

JA: I learned a good way to think about shifting public opinion from Brad Ogilvie at William Penn House. He said, if you think of people as being placed along a spectrum of positions on an issue, and you want to move all of them closer to your position, you approach each one differently, depending on the position they start in. If you have a climate change skeptic, you just want to move them one degree closer to your position; you shouldn't try for a conversion experience. Everyone you get, regardless of where they start on the political spectrum, work on an incremental basis to move them closer to where you want them to be.

So FCNL is working simultaneously to change people who are placed in a variety of positions along the spectrum. Our Call to Conscience is just one effort. Another is supporting bipartisan legislation in Congress, no matter how modest it is. When we ask climate activists to engage in this particular approach of incremental change, activists who may have been feeling despair about climate change for many years, this incremental approach – faith-based cooperation, talking to moderate Republicans, etc. – it's giving people hope and its getting them energized. And they've been drawing other people in. So everyone is taking this gradual and incremental shift, and then they see the success of this, and that creates momentum also. In expanding this beyond the faith community, we use the analogy of a climate advocacy orchestra – quiet conversations among environmentalists, conservatives, citizen organizations – working both on the Hill and at the grassroots level.

WF: Trying to shift the owners of the petroleum industry reminds me of Woolman working to shift the Quaker slave-owners. Some slave-owners actively freed their slaves in their own lifetime. Others held onto them till they died, then set them free in their wills. But at some point, there's a sea change in the economy, a big disruption, and some people lose what they had expected to inherit. But there's enough cultural momentum for change that people adapt and adjust. So these incremental conversations that you're having with

Republicans are ideally going to happen on a macro-economic scale, too. And at some point, the petroleum industry won't have the bucks to control things.

JA: Yes, Amen! A lovely future you just mapped out.

WF: Well, I need to have some sort of map in my mind. I need to be part of a conversation about what the big trajectory is – the arc of justice is long, so where is it going on this one? I won't really get involved, and I don't think the people of this country will really get involved, unless we have some sense of rightness of direction here. And unless there's some way to see, how can we realistically shift our whole economy?

JA: Interesting you say that though. I've had conversations with Tim DeChristopher. He's an environmental activist who did a direct action at a Bureau of Land Management auction in Utah in 2008. They were auctioning off BLM land for oil and gas development, and Tim bid successfully on several parcels.

WF: Yeah I saw a film about him at IMYM last year.

JA: Yes, that's him. We've had discussions about the pros and cons of both FCNL's efforts with our Call to Conscience and the pros of the non-violent direct action that he's engaged in. Our first conversation was very respectful, but barbed. Both of us were kind of barbed. But in subsequent conversations, we came to recognize the value and strategic advantage of having both approaches in play, how they complement one another. I wish I had the courage that he did. We do need people to stand up and put their liberty on the line with things that are just inherently wrong.

WF: So assuming we can take back our democracy, how hopeful are you that humanity can achieve a livable balance with the natural world? What might we do to achieve that?

JA: I am fearful for our future. A prominent environmentalist told me privately, "I think we're done," in terms of our ability to prevent some of the predicted impacts. What the indigenous people have been saying to mainstream society since First Contact still remains true: We're not in right relationship with our relatives, with our Earth, and there is going to be hell to pay. Often it seems to me, our purpose now is to stop things from being more horrific than they might be. Some of the people I admire most are ones who endured horrors like the Holocaust – with indomitable God-sourced spirit – like Maximilian Kolbe. The utter madness of climate denial in the context of past, present, and future impacts, to have that in your face all of the time, it is slow-motion trauma. Seeking to live the divine ideal in the face of difficult of circumstances remains one of the greatest of human endeavors. To seek that grace, that of the divine in God and all, and to help and inspire

others: I don't pretend to be living in that state, but I am seeking to live in that way, and it gives me purpose.

WF: I've got one more question for you. Do you see any particular, special contributions that Quakers can make in these efforts?

JA: Yes, so many. I'll list them off, but I don't know if it will be organized.

First, in my experience, it seems virtually inherent to Quaker understanding that fundamental values need to be reflected back out into society. And so, for example, engagement with Congress is a natural extension of Quakers' desire for their values to be reflected in our political system. Quakers see their values as being alive in the "now," not just in the "should be." Some of my faith colleagues who are working in other faith traditions say they have a hard time inspiring some of their constituents because they are working in faith organizations that think it's dirty business to engage in politics. For Quakers, political engagement is like, "Of course! This is how we make a better society!" So that inherent understanding is such a blessing, and it's a blessing to work with so many Quakers across the country who are willing to engage politically.

Second, it is a blessing to work with people who truly practice seeking the light of God within all. This attitude is enormously helpful when you're trying to reach out to Republicans in a heavily partisan government. Quakers are willing to really step into that. Quakers help create a culture of listening. And they become particularly bright lights within the DC context, where real listening is rare.

Third, the quiet: this has been an amazing revelation. Sometimes in meetings with politicians and legislators, people start to get their feathers ruffled, and you just feel the tension rising in the room. Then a Quaker will say, "Can we just take a moment here for silence?" And then the pressure valve lets go, and everyone calms down. And that's so beautifully Quaker, and simple, and so right. My colleague at the Quaker UN office in Bonn, Lindsay Fielder-Cook, works very closely with United Nations, hosting what they call "quiet conversations." For decades, Lindsay has been bringing together representatives of different nation states who have been at each other's throats and holding two-week listening sessions with them. She brings them into a safe space and says, "This is a space where we are going to talk on a more personal and informal level, where you're going to get to know one another." It purposely doesn't have a specific agenda, no convincing or pushing – none of that stuff. The short description is that she provides a humanizing space for people who have been at each other's throats in a dehumanizing environment. And they are so enriched by it. She has gotten such praise and strong recommendations from some of the highest leaders in these negotiating processes. "Please just keep doing what you're

doing, I don't know what you're doing or how you're doing it, but please keep doing it!"
Amazing.

WF: Is there anything else that we missed?

JA: If I may, for a few minutes. This has been on my mind for a while, and I'm just starting to figure out how express it. It goes back to fundamentals, about asking whether we are practicing our ideals and how hard that is. I've been thinking about how pride was the first sin recognized by Adam and Eve. When the Serpent showed the apple to Adam and Eve, he said, "If you eat this, you will be like God." So pride is the first of the seven deadly sins, and the opposite of pride is humility. So that's what I aspire to be – humble. I don't pretend I'm there yet, but I've been thinking that's an increasingly important dimension of what we all need. I don't know who "we" are, but some of us, we need to have more humility in our relations with everybody and everything.

WF: I feel that, too.

JA: One of the leaders of a tribe I worked with, he was one the presidents of the National Congress of American Indians, and during one of our conferences, when it was time for him to start his presentation, he said to the audience, "May I speak?" Everyone was like, "What?" And he said again, "May I speak?" Then he said, "In the old tradition of my tribe, you asked permission before you spoke." The way that leaders were selected to lead the tribe in the old days was that the elders would observe the everyday behavior of the children around them, and those who were considerate and helped others and had compassion, those were the children they chose to be leaders. It's a great challenge, a vigorous challenge, to nurture the humility that we think we have.

WF: It's also a blessing, though. When I'm feeling put upon and not knowing what to do and feeling this pressure to live up to something, to just think, "Well, I'm just me, and I can only do what I can do," there's something in it that's also kind of relieving and steadying and stabilizing.

JA: Thank-you for that.

WF: Well, I'm so glad that you're doing this job.

JA: Well, thank you. I feel blessed to be here.