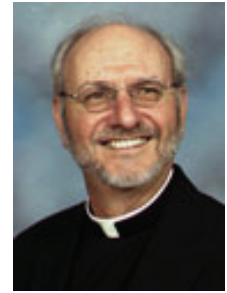


Reverend John S. Rausch is a priest in the Glenmary order and director of the Office of Peace and Justice for the Diocese of Lexington, KY. He is a syndicated columnist whose articles are published in diocesan newspapers throughout the United States. He also serves on the Social Concerns Committee of the Catholic Conference.



Selling a White Elephant

The last U.S. license resulting in the construction and operation of a new nuclear power plant was issued in 1973. Since then the tragedies at Three Mile Island and Chernobyl unplugged the enthusiasm for expanding commercial nuclear energy. Yet, with concerns about global warming, nuclear energy is back on line.

The Energy Policy Act of 2005 contains 15 provisions allocating \$12 billion to the power industry for building new nuclear plants. The Department of Energy estimates a need for 45 percent more electricity in the U.S. by 2030. Generating electricity from fossil fuels could effect catastrophic climate change by contributing intolerable levels of carbon dioxide, the leading cause of greenhouse gases, so nuclear energy is touted as an appropriate substitute. The 103 nuclear plants currently on line produce 20 percent of U.S. electricity. Possibly 12 to 19 new nuclear facilities may be ordered within three years.

Nuclear proponents emphasize that generating electricity at nuclear plants emits no carbon dioxide and the marginal cost of producing an additional kilowatt-hour from existing nuclear plants hovers near two cents.

Opponents of nuclear energy counter with three critical concerns: economics, safety and waste.

Nuclear critics charge the real cost of nuclear energy must include cost overruns, the disposal of nuclear waste and the decommissioning of reactors. With these additional costs, MIT prices nuclear at 6.7 cents per kilowatt-hour, a cost higher than coal, gas and some alternative energy sources. Without government subsidies, nuclear energy is expensive, and historically no plants have been built within deregulated electricity markets.

Safety concerns cover both radiation and terrorism. Dr. Helen Caldicott, a leading opponent of nuclear power, writes, "Nuclear reactors routinely emit radioactive materials, including the fat-soluble noble gases xenon, krypton, and argon" that get inhaled by populations near reactors, absorbed into the blood and concentrated in body fat. One epidemiological study by Dr. Joseph Mangano of the New York-based Radiation and Public Health Project found elevated infant mortality rates, higher breast cancer mortality rates and increased miscarriages in the population around one central Virginia reactor.

Nuclear plants represent a potential target for terrorist attack, not directly aimed at the reactor core, but possibly triggering a meltdown by cutting the external electricity supply, disrupting the million-gallons-per-minute intake

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

2 Selling a White Elephant

of cooling water, or targeting the pools of water containing spent nuclear fuel outside the concrete containment domes. Additionally, by promoting nuclear energy to avert climate change implies extending nuclear power to most countries for the same reason. Some irresponsible nations could carelessly construct reactors or mishandle waste, plus an inevitable link remains between generating electricity and making nuclear bombs.

However, the Achilles' heel of nuclear power remains waste. The problem of 60,000 tons of radioactive waste temporarily stored in cooling ponds beside nuclear reactors is awaiting some final resolution, probably burial somewhere for untold millennia. Transporting this waste risks highway and rail safety, while contributing more carbon dioxide for global warming and lessening nuclear energy's carbon-free claim.

People of faith recognize the analysis to face global warming: "The earth is the Lord's and all it holds" (Ps. 24:1). Stewardship demands reducing our wasteful habits of consumption. It means practicing solidarity with our children and our children's children to the Seventh Generation, as Native American spirituality suggests. We hold the environment as a trust that has a social mortgage—a gift we possess for the common good. Out of sync with nature, radioactive waste violates the natural order of creation.

It's time to screw in a compact fluorescent light bulb, using 60 percent less energy, and think up bright ideas for saving the earth.

July 2006