

Headline: Break free from coal, fossil fuels

Byline: Archbishop Ramon Arguelles

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Easter Sunday, the most important celebration in the calendar of the Catholic Church, is fast approaching. But as we commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ and trust in God's promise of life everlasting, very urgent concerns give us less cause for glee.

Last month was both Care for Creation month in the Catholic Church and the hottest February on record globally. In the same month, Cyclone "Winston" cost the lives of over 40 people in the Pacific island-nation of Fiji; it was the strongest tropical cyclone ever to make landfall on that country. It brought painful reminders to many in the Philippines of the devastating Typhoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan), which killed more than 6,000 people in 2013.

These events cannot be acts of God. They are circumstances that can be explained. The continued emissions of greenhouse gases contribute to climate change and increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather disturbances. It must be everyone's concern that even countries most vulnerable to the effects of global warming, such as the Philippines, continue to build coal-fired power plants. Coal is one of the sources of energy that contribute the most greenhouse gases emissions that lead to global warming and climate change.

Last year, Pope Francis, in the encyclical "Laudato Si," called upon all Catholics to act on climate change and protect the Earth; he urged solidarity for the poor and the most vulnerable, for it is they who suffer foremost and most severely the effects of global warming.

That encyclical helped to build momentum toward the landmark climate change agreement reached at the COP21 summit in Paris last December. There, world leaders agreed to end their countries' addiction to fossil fuels and to keep global warming at least below 2 degrees centigrade above preindustrial levels. The agreement included an aspiration to meet a 1.5-degree ceiling, on the grounds that even a 2-degree rise risks dangerous impacts on natural systems.

The Paris Agreement has given the Philippines a clear timeline for action. The next major milestone on that timeline is the Paris Agreement signing ceremony on April 22 in New York. The whole world will be watching the leaders that would gather to sign on the dotted line and renew their commitment to the Earth.

The Philippines has played a crucial role in those climate talks over recent years, arguing passionately for action as supertyphoon after supertyphoon ravaged our country. The Paris climate negotiations last December succeeded in including the more ambitious 1.5-degree aspiration in the agreement, in large part thanks to the efforts of the Climate Vulnerable Forum chaired by the Philippines.

But ratification of the agreement will mean nothing without concrete action. We cannot champion environmental integrity internationally if we don't practice environmental integrity locally.

Last year, the Philippine government approved the construction of an additional 25 coal-fired power plants. The continued reliance on this most polluting of fuels must cease. The use of coal is a major contributor to climate change. Coal mining and coal plants cause extreme harm to local communities and ecosystems, as we in the province of Batangas know only too well. It is also

economically unattractive: The Philippines imports around three-quarters of the coal we use, costing us precious foreign reserves.

The Philippines is blessed with enormous renewable energy resources. It is second only to the United States in the amount of geothermal power it produces. Hundreds of renewable energy projects are in the pipeline. The Paris Agreement is set to unlock billions of dollars in investment in clean energy projects—flows of finance that can benefit our country.

More industrialized nations, such as the United States and those in the European Union, are taking increased decisive action. However, the scale of the climate challenge requires action from all countries, including the Philippines. As this country prepares for general elections in May, let this question be raised and reflected: Does not our country deserve a government that will do everything to protect Filipino families from the ravages of dirty energy and climate change? A government willing to call for an immediate moratorium on new coal plants, a total stop to coal mining, and a speedy transition to renewable and clean energy? It is immoral to burden future generations with pollution and the cost of mistaken energy choices made today. Let us show one another and the world that we are serious about reaching the global goals our people worked so hard to encourage world leaders to set in Paris. It is time to end the age of coal.

Let us have a true and lasting national renewal. May this Easter bring this country and our people a real transfiguration for the better. Happy Easter!

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Ramon Arguelles is archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Lipa.