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# **“If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation” The Catholic Church in the Face of the Threats of Climate Change**

## **Introduction**

In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty.

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. The public in general, as well as political leaders are concerned about this problem, and experts from a wide range of disciplines are studying its causes. Moreover, a new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programmes and initiatives.

Many ethical values, fundamental to the development of a peaceful society, are particularly relevant to the ecological question. The fact that many challenges facing the world today are interdependent confirms the need for carefully coordinated solutions based on a morally coherent world view.

For Christians, such a world view is grounded in religious convictions drawn from Revelation. Here a brief reflection on the biblical account of creation might be helpful.

## **Creation according to the Bible**

In the Book of Genesis, where we find God's first self-revelation to humanity (*Gen* 1-3), there is a recurring refrain: "And God saw that it was good". After creating the heavens, the sea, the earth and all it contains, God created man and woman. At this point the refrain changes markedly: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good (*Gen* 1:31). God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman, and only then – as we read – could he rest "from all his work" (*Gen* 2:3).

Adam and Eve's call to share in the unfolding of God's plan of creation brought into play those abilities and gifts which distinguish the human being from all other creatures. At the same time, their call established a fixed relationship between mankind and the rest of creation. Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve were to have exercised their dominion over the earth (*Gen* 1:28) with wisdom and love. Instead, they destroyed the existing harmony by deliberately going against the Creator's plan, that is, by choosing to sin. This resulted not only in man's alienation from himself, in death and fratricide, but also in the earth's "rebellion" against him (cf. *Gen* 3:17-19; 4:12). All of creation became subject to futility, waiting in a mysterious way to be set free and to obtain a glorious liberty together with all the children of God (cf. *Rom* 8:20-21).

Christians believe that the Death and Resurrection of Christ accomplished the work of reconciling humanity to the Father, who "was pleased ... through (Christ) to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (*Col* 1:19-20). Creation was thus made new (cf. *Rev* 21:5). Once subjected to the bondage of sin and decay (cf. *Rom* 8:21), it has now received new life while "we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (*2 Pt* 3:13). Thus, the Father "has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery ... which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite *all things* in him, all things in heaven and things on earth" (*Eph* 1:9-10).

## **Moral implications of the Biblical account of Creation**

These biblical considerations help us to understand better the relationship between human activity and the whole of creation. When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: "Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away" (*Hos* 4:3).

The profound sense that the earth is "suffering" is also shared by those who do not profess our faith in God. Indeed, the increasing devastation of the world of nature is apparent to all. It results from the behavior of people who show a callous disregard for the hidden, yet perceivable requirements of the order and harmony which govern nature itself.

People are asking anxiously if it is still possible to remedy the damage which has been done. Clearly, an adequate solution cannot be found merely in a better management or a more rational use of the earth's resources, as important as these may be. Rather, we must go to the source of the problem and face in its entirety that profound moral crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect.

Certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character. First among these is the indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology. Many recent discoveries have brought undeniable benefits to humanity. Indeed, they demonstrate the nobility of the human vocation to participate responsibly in God's creative action in the world. Unfortunately, it is now clear that the application of these discoveries in the fields of industry and agriculture have produced harmful long-term effects. This has led to the painful realization that we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.

The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related "greenhouse effect" has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs. Industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels, unrestricted deforestation, the use of certain types of herbicides, coolants and propellants: all of these are known to harm the atmosphere and environment. The resulting meteorological and

atmospheric changes range from damage to health to the possible future submersion of low-lying lands.

While in some cases the damage already done may well be irreversible, in many other cases it can still be halted. It is necessary, however, that the entire human community – individuals, States and international bodies – take seriously the responsibility that is theirs.

### **Pope Benedict XVI: Message for the 2010 World Day for Peace: „If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation”**

It is against this background that Pope Benedict XVI, in his Message for the 2010 World Day for Peace, said that the degradation of the environment is a pressing moral problem that threatens peace and human life itself: “We cannot remain indifferent to what is happening around us, for the deterioration of any one part of the planet affects us all.”

He went on to say that government policies, the activity of multinational corporations and the day-to-day behavior of individuals all have an impact on the environment. While the future of the world hangs in the balance because of what people are doing today, the negative effects of pollution and environmental exploitation already can be seen.

“Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?” the Pope asked.

Already the world is seeing the “growing phenomenon of ‘environmental refugees’, people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat” to migrate in search of food, water and unpolluted air.

“It is becoming more and more evident that the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our lifestyle and the prevailing models of consumption and production, which are often unsustainable from a social, environmental and even economic point of view,” the Pope said. In addition, he warned of the “actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources.”

“Protecting the natural environment in order to build a world of peace is thus a duty incumbent upon each and all. It is an urgent challenge, one to be faced with renewed and concerted commitment; it is also a providential opportunity to hand down to coming generations the prospect of a better future for all,” the Pope wrote.

Pope Benedict does not propose technical solutions or interfere in government policies. Rather, he recalls the church’s commitment to defending the earth, water and air, which are the Creator’s gifts to humanity.

With the real suffering environmental destruction already is causing and the devastation it will wreak in the future, the Pope clearly stated that humanity needs a profound cultural renewal; it needs to rediscover those values which can serve as the solid basis for building a brighter future for all. Our present crises – be they economic, food-related, environmental or social – are ultimately also moral crises and all of them are interrelated. Solving the crises will require people to work together and take responsibility for their individual actions. Specifically, a solution will require “a lifestyle marked by sobriety and solidarity, with new rules and forms of engagement, one which focuses confidently and courageously on strategies that actually work, while decisively rejecting those that have failed.”

## **The Catholic Church and Climate Change**

Pope Benedict XVI’s 2010 World Peace Day Message was timely as it followed the December 2009 Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change. The Conference revealed how long it takes to create the clear and firm political will necessary to adopt common binding measures and adequate budgets for an effective mitigation and adaptation to ongoing climate change. Was this political will slow in taking shape due to the complexity of the interlinking issues that we must tackle? Was it mainly a problem of conflicting national interests? Or was it the difficulty in translating into numbers the by-now acquired principle of common and differentiated responsibility? Or was it still the predominance of energy policies over care of the environment? Undoubtedly, there was a little of all of this.

However, it should be noted how the many considerations that were developed during this process converged on a central aspect: the necessity of a new and deeper reflection on the meaning of the economy and its purposes, and a profound and far-reaching revision of the model for development, to

correct the malfunctions and distortions. This, in fact, is required by the good ecological health of the planet and especially as an urgent response to the cultural and moral crisis of man, whose symptoms have long been evident all over the world.

With realism, trust and hope the Catholic Church calls upon all to assume the new responsibilities which call us to the scene of a world in need of a deep cultural renewal and a rediscovery of fundamental values on which to build a better future. The moral crises that humanity is currently experiencing, be they economic, nutritional, environmental, or social – all deeply inter-linked – oblige us to redesign our way, to establish new guidelines and to find new forms of engagement. These crises become thus the occasion for discernment and new thinking.

Obviously, this obligation requires the collection of detailed and accurate scientific analysis to help avoid the anxieties and fears of many and the cynicism and indifference on the part of others. It also requires the responsible involvement of all segments of human society to search for and discover an adequate response to the tangible reality of climate change. If the diagnosis – by force of circumstances in the hands of science, information and politics – finds it difficult to provide clarity and to motivate the concerted and timely action of those responsible for human society, reason and the innate sense of shared responsibility of the people once again must prevail.

Civil society and local authorities did not wait for the expected political and legally binding conclusions of our meetings, which take such an incredibly long time. Instead, individuals, groups, local authorities and communities have already begun an impressive series of initiatives to give form to the two cornerstones of the response to climate change: adaptation and mitigation. While technical solutions are necessary, they are not sufficient. The wisest and most effective programs focus on information, education, and the formation of the sense of responsibility in children and adults towards environmentally sound patterns of development and stewardship of creation.

These initiatives have already started to build up a mosaic of experiences and achievements marked by a widespread ecological conversion. These new attitudes and behaviors have the potential to create the necessary intra-generational and inter-generational solidarity and dispel any sterile sense of fear, apocalyptic terror, overbearing control and hostility towards humanity that are multiplied in media accounts and other reports.

The Holy See, albeit in the small state of Vatican City, also is making significant efforts to take a lead in environmental protection by promoting and implementing energy diversification projects targeted at the development of renewable energy, with the objective of reducing emissions of CO<sub>2</sub> and its consumption of fossil fuels.

In addition, the Holy See is giving substance to the necessity to disseminate an education in environmental responsibility, which also seeks to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology. Many Catholic educational institutions are engaged in promoting such a model of education, both in schools and in universities. Moreover, Episcopal Conferences, Dioceses, parishes and faith-based NGOs have been devoted to advocacy and management of ecological programs for a number of years.

These efforts are about working on lifestyles, as the current dominant models of consumption and production are often unsustainable from the point of view of social, environmental, economic and even moral analysis. We must safeguard creation – soil, water and air – as a gift entrusted to everyone, but we must also and above all prevent mankind from destroying itself. The degradation of nature is directly connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when the human ecology is respected within society, the environmental ecology will benefit. The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself.

Environment and climate change entail a shared responsibility toward all humanity, especially the poor and future generations. There is an inseparable link between the protection of creation, education and an ethical approach to the economy and development. The Holy See hopes that the process started in Copenhagen in 2009 can help ever more to appreciate this link.

## **Quid facendum?**

Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness – both individual and collective – are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence.

Hence, the concepts of an ordered universe and a common heritage both point to the necessity of a more internationally coordinated approach to the

management of the earth's goods. In many cases the effects of ecological problems transcend the borders of individual States; hence their solution cannot be found solely on the national level.

At the same time, the need for joint action on the international level does not lessen the responsibility of each individual State. Not only should each State join with others in implementing internationally accepted standards, but it should also make or facilitate necessary socio-economic adjustments within its own borders, giving special attention to the most vulnerable sectors of society.

The ecological crisis reveals the urgent moral need for a new solidarity, especially in relations between the developing nations and those that are highly industrialized. States must increasingly share responsibility, in complementary ways, for the promotion of a natural and social environment that is both peaceful and healthy. The newly industrialized States cannot, for example, be asked to apply restrictive environmental standards to their emerging industries unless the industrialized States first apply them within their own boundaries. At the same time, countries in the process of industrialization are not morally free to repeat the errors made in the past by others, and recklessly continue to damage the environment through industrial pollutants, radical deforestation or unlimited exploitation of non-renewable resources. In this context, there is urgent need to find a solution to the treatment and disposal of toxic wastes.

It must also be said that the proper ecological balance will not be found without directly addressing the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world. Rural poverty and unjust land distribution in many countries, for example, have led to subsistence farming and to the exhaustion of the soil. Once their land yields no more, many farmers move on to clear new land, thus accelerating uncontrolled deforestation, or they settle in urban centres which lack the infrastructure to receive them. Likewise, some heavily indebted countries are destroying their natural heritage, at the price of irreparable ecological imbalances, in order to develop new products for export. Any just solution to these realities will require a courageous reform of structures, as well as new ways of relating among peoples and States.

But there is another dangerous menace which threatens us, namely war. Unfortunately, modern science already has the capacity to change the environment for hostile purposes. Alterations of this kind over the long term could

have unforeseeable and still more serious consequences. Despite the international agreements which prohibit chemical, bacteriological and biological warfare, the fact is that laboratory research continues to develop new offensive weapons capable of altering the balance of nature.

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause. As I have already stated, the seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.

An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth. This education cannot be rooted in mere sentiment or empty wishes. Its purpose cannot be ideological or political. It must not be based on a rejection of the modern world or a vague desire to return to some "paradise lost". Instead, a true education in responsibility entails a genuine conversion in ways of thought and behavior. Churches and religious bodies, non-governmental and governmental organizations, indeed all members of society, have a precise role to play in such education. The first educator, however, is the family, where the child learns to respect his neighbor and to love nature.

## **Conclusion**

In 1979, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Saint Francis of Assisi as the heavenly Patron of those who promote ecology (cf. Apostolic Letter *Inter Sanctos*: AAS 71 [1979], 1509f.). St Francis offers Christians an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation. As a friend of the poor who was loved by God's creatures, Saint Francis invited all of creation – animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon – to give honor and praise to the Lord. The poor man of Assisi gives us striking witness that when we are at peace with God we are better able to devote ourselves to building up that peace with all creation which is inseparable from peace among all peoples.

It is the Church's hope that the inspiration of Saint Francis will help us to keep ever alive a sense of "fraternity" with all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created. And may he remind us of our serious obligation to respect and watch over them with care, in light of that greater and higher fraternity that exists within the human family.