



Building a New Culture:

Central Themes in Recent Church Teaching on the Environment

**Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops**

In recent decades, papal statements have reminded Catholics the world over that we need to give heightened attention to the environment. In his message for the World Day of Peace, Pope John Paul II noted the 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. . . . 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.”¹ Twenty years later, Pope Benedict took the same occasion to draw attention to the threatening situation “arising from the neglect - if not downright misuse - of the earth and the natural goods that God has given us,”² and reiterated a call from his message of 2008 calling for a renewing and strengthening of the “covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.”³

Many Catholics today are rightly concerned about the state of our natural environment. In order to assist them, the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace is offering this modest outline of eight central themes found in recent Church teaching on the environment. A brief description is given of each theme, along with some example citations from recent papal documents. These reflect on how a Catholic approach to economic questions, social justice, and environmental questions are necessarily viewed in relation to each other. Their interrelationship is properly understood within a biblical framework grounded in our understanding of God’s creative and redeeming work, Christian anthropology, and the role God asks human beings to play in the created order. It is hoped that these themes will serve as a guide to discussion, reflection, and decision-making on the very real environmental problems we face today.

¹ John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 1990) 1.

² Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 1.

³ Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2008) 7.

1 Human Beings are Creatures Made in God's Image

Human beings are part of the natural world, yet simultaneously transcend it. There are two key elements here: (1) human beings are creatures, i.e., we are not God. We are therefore not to act with god-like domination over the rest of creation, but rather to recognize that creation comes to us as a gift from our Creator. (2) Unique among creatures, we are created in God's image, and therefore bear an inestimable dignity.

The first step towards a correct relationship with the world around us is the recognition by humans of their status as created beings. Man is not God; he is His image. For this reason he must seek to be more sensitive to the presence of God in his surroundings. In all creatures, and especially in human beings, there is an epiphany, or manifestation, of God.⁴

Man, being the image of God, has a true affinity with him too. On the basis of this teaching, development cannot consist only in the use, dominion over and indiscriminate possession of created things and the products of human industry, but rather in subordinating the possession, dominion and use to man's divine likeness and to his vocation to immortality.⁵

There exists a certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us. On the other hand, a correct understanding of the relationship between man and the environment will not end by absolutizing nature or by considering it more important than the human person. If the Church's magisterium expresses grave misgivings about notions of the environment inspired by ecocentrism and biocentrism, it is because such notions eliminate the difference of identity and worth between the human person and other living things. In the name of a supposedly egalitarian vision of the "dignity" of all living creatures, such notions end up abolishing the distinctiveness and superior role of human beings. They also open the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism, which would see the source of man's salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms.

⁴ Benedict XVI, Message to Brazilian Bishops for the 2011 Brotherhood Campaign (February 16, 2011).

⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) 29.

The Church, for her part, is concerned that the question be approached in a balanced way, with respect for the "grammar" which the Creator has inscribed in his handiwork by giving man the role of a steward and administrator with responsibility over creation, a role which man must certainly not abuse, but also one which he may not abdicate. In the same way, the opposite position, which would absolutize technology and human power, results in a grave assault not only on nature, but also on human dignity itself.⁶

2 Creation has an Intrinsic Order

The created universe is the fruit of the love of God, which has produced human beings in his image who can recognize the intelligent ordering of creation. Because of their privileged position in creation, human beings must recognize their responsibility to be guardians of this creation, and to ensure the proper balance of the ecosystems they depend on.



The law written by God in nature and capable of being read by reason leads to respect for the Creator's plan, a plan which is meant for the benefit of mankind. This law establishes a certain inner order which man discovers and which he must preserve. Any activity in conflict with this order inevitably does damage to man himself.⁷

Is it not true that what we call "nature" in a cosmic sense has its origin in 'a plan of love and truth'?⁸

When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation.⁹

⁶ Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 13.

⁷ John Paul II, Homily in Zamosc, Poland (June 12, 1999) 3.

⁸ Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 6.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) 48.

3 “Human Ecology” and its Relationship to Environmental Ecology

If ecology implies a system of relationships and interactions, then we can say that maintaining a proper ecology of our natural environment is only possible when we foster a truly “human ecology,” that is, when we promote human relationships and interactions that respect the dignity of the human person, the common good, and nature. This is because of humanity’s unique place in creation. Central to this human ecology is the right to life of every human being, from conception to natural death.

The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature.¹⁰

The human being will be capable of respecting other creatures only if he keeps the full meaning of life in his own heart. Otherwise he will come to despise himself and his surroundings, and to disrespect the environment, the creation, in which he lives. For this reason, the first ecology to be defended is ‘human ecology’. This is to say that, without a clear defense of human life from conception until natural death; without a defense of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman; without an authentic defense of those excluded and marginalized by society, not overlooking, in this context, those who have lost everything in natural calamities, we will never be able to speak of authentic protection of the environment.¹¹



4 Responsible Stewardship

Nature has attained its fulfillment in human beings, who have received the task of giving thanks for it and caring for it. This care, identified as “subduing” (Gn 1.28) in the Bible, is not domination but rather “responsible stewardship.” As stewards, human beings recognize that the environment does not belong to them but is a gift entrusted to them which demands responsibility in action. Human beings discern the role granted to them by God by exercising their intelligence and ethical judgment.

The created world, structured in an intelligent way by God, is entrusted to our responsibility and though we are able to analyze it and transform it we cannot consider ourselves creation’s absolute master. We are called, rather, to exercise responsible stewardship of creation, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits, and to cultivate it, finding the resources necessary for every one to live with dignity. Through the help of nature itself and through hard work and creativity, humanity is indeed capable of carrying out its grave duty to hand on the earth to future generations so that they too, in turn, will be able to inhabit it worthily and continue to cultivate it.¹²

Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world’s population.¹³

If we examine carefully the social and environmental crisis which the world community is facing, we must conclude that we are still betraying the mandate God has given us: to be stewards called to collaborate with God in watching over creation in holiness and wisdom.¹⁴

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) 51.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Message to Brazilian Bishops for the 2011 Brotherhood Campaign (February 16, 2011).

¹² Benedict XVI, General Audience (August 26, 2009).

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) 50.

¹⁴ John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (June 10, 2002).



5 Care for the Environment is a Moral Issue

Because of the place of human beings in nature, care for the environment is never only an economic or technological issue; it is above all a moral one. Any solutions that attempt to solve environmental problems but are based only on utilitarian factors will not provide authentic solutions. This is because both economic activity and the use of technology are human actions and therefore always contain a moral component. The destruction of our environment is due to a neglect of ecology caused by short-term economic interests and the selfish quest for pleasure or profit, and is therefore ultimately caused by a lack of Gospel values.

The limitation imposed from the beginning by the Creator himself and expressed symbolically by the prohibition not to 'eat of the fruit of the tree' (cf. Gen 2.16-17) shows clearly enough that, when it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) 34.

¹⁶ John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 1990) 5.

Technology is highly attractive because it draws us out of our physical limitations and broadens our horizon. *But human freedom is authentic only when it responds to the fascination of technology with decisions that are the fruit of moral responsibility.* Hence the pressing need for formation in an ethically responsible use of technology.¹⁷

Economic activity needs to consider the fact that 'every economic decision has a moral consequence' and thus show increased respect for the environment. When making use of natural resources, we should be concerned for their protection and consider the cost entailed – environmentally and socially – as an essential part of the overall expenses incurred.¹⁸

6 Solidarity

Because creation has been entrusted to the human race as a whole and not to any one person, group, or nation, both its resources and the responsibility for its care must be shared by all. This implies solidarity between individuals, peoples, and nations, as well as "intergenerational solidarity," that is, the preservation of the environment for future generations. Also of key importance is our solidarity with the poor, whose ability to access resources is often limited. Since environmental degradation is often related to poverty, solidarity demands that structural forms of poverty be addressed. It also demands that those who use and exploit resources bear the true costs of this use, which must take into account the environmental repercussions on future generations. In summary, solidarity with respect to the environment is based on the requirements of justice and the common good, which is understood to extend not only between those living, but forward, to those not yet born.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) 70.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 7.





In order that the world may be habitable tomorrow and that everyone may find a place in it, I encourage public authorities and all men and women of good will to question themselves about their daily attitudes and decisions, which should not be dictated by an unlimited and unrestrained quest for material goods without regard for the surroundings in which we live, and which should be capable of responding to the basic needs of present and future generations. This attention constitutes an essential dimension of solidarity between generations.¹⁹

The proper ecological balance will not be found without *directly addressing the structural forms of poverty* that exist throughout the world.²⁰

The economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources must be recognized with transparency and borne by those who incur them, and not by other peoples or future generations. The protection of the environment, and the safeguarding of resources and of the climate, oblige all international leaders to act jointly respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the world.²¹

*A greater sense of intergenerational solidarity is urgently needed.*²²

7 Creation and Spirituality

The wondrous beauty of creation ought to lead us to recognize within it the artistry of our Creator and to give him praise. The created world is not simply a place to live, or material for our use; it possesses an aesthetic element which can lift our minds to God.

In beholding the glory of the Trinity in creation, man must contemplate, sing and rediscover wonder. In contemporary society people become indifferent “not for lack of wonders, but for lack of wonder” (*G. K. Chesterton*). For the believer, to contemplate creation is also to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice. . . . Nature thus becomes a gospel which speaks to us of God.²³

Through the human person, spokesman for all creation, all living things praise the Lord. Our breath of life that also presupposes self-knowledge, awareness and freedom (cf. Prov 20.27) becomes the song and prayer of the whole of life that vibrates in the universe.²⁴

8 Responses to Current Environmental Problems

The Church does not propose or evaluate specific technical solutions to our current environmental problems. Rather, her task is to remind people of the relationship between creation, human beings, and the Creator. Nonetheless, there are certain general principles without which problems cannot be remedied. These include:

- ◆ ***The Urgent Need for Action:*** Actions are needed that can be implemented sooner rather than later.
- ◆ ***Policy Development:*** Policies need to be developed to protect the environment. It is through clear policies that a government protects the common good against selfish interests, whether corporate or individual.
- ◆ ***International Cooperation:*** Nations cannot solve environmental problems alone. The interdependence of ecosystems requires policies that go beyond the borders of states.

¹⁹ John Paul II, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (March 12, 1999) 3.

²⁰ John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 1990) 11.

²¹ Benedict XVI, General Audience (August 26, 2009).

²² Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 8.

²³ John Paul II, General Audience (January 26, 2000).

²⁴ John Paul II, General Audience (January 9, 2002).



- ◆ **Financial Responsibility:** The costs of implementing policies should lie primarily with the states who bear responsibility for the problem in the first place and not with those states who are its victims and who represent the poorest populations.
- ◆ **Lowering Consumption:** Developed nations must decrease their consumption of goods. Developing nations must take care to use the earth's limited resources wisely.

Without entering into the merit of specific technical solutions, the Church is nonetheless concerned, as an 'expert in humanity', to call attention to the relationship between the Creator, human beings and the created order.²⁵

The technologically advanced societies can and must lower their domestic energy consumption . . . What is also needed, though, is a worldwide redistribution of energy resources, so that countries lacking those resources can have access to them.²⁶

Natural resources should be used in such a way that immediate benefits do not have a negative impact on living creatures, human and not, present and future; that the protection of private property does not conflict with the universal destination of goods; that human activity does not compromise the fruitfulness of the earth, for the benefit of people now and in the future. . . . Ambitious national policies are required, together with a necessary international commitment.²⁷



Conclusion

Often enough, the actions of nations, governments, industries, and other organizations have not respected the proper relationship of human beings to the earth. Yet it is also true that, perhaps equally often, we as individuals have been guilty of not showing proper respect and care for our environment, whether through action or omission. This is why Blessed John Paul II, in a joint statement with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, declared that "a new approach and a new culture are needed, based on the centrality of the human person within creation and inspired by environmentally ethical behavior stemming from our triple relationship to God, to self and to creation."²⁸ Each of us is responsible for doing our part to build up this culture, which must be a culture of "life" in every sense of the word. But since this new culture can only develop when we recognize the proper way of relating to God, to ourselves, and to the rest of creation, the eight themes above have been presented to help Catholics in this task of cultural renewal. For it is our duty "to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God's creation, and to bequeath to future generations a world in which they will be able to live."²⁹ May the Lord grant to Catholics and to all people of good will the virtue of hope, so that we will not lose heart as we strive to safeguard our environment.

²⁸ John Paul II and Bartholomew I, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (June 10, 2002).

²⁹ Benedict XVI and Bartholomew I, Common Declaration of Benedict XVI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (November 30, 2006).

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Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas

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²⁵ Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 4.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) 49.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2010) 8, 10.