

Church teaching on environmental issues

Paul VI - *Octotessima Adveniens* , 1971

21. Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family.

John Paul II - World Day of Peace 1990

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 most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.

Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a "cosmos" endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity.

On the other hand, the earth is ultimately a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, 'God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples' (Gaudium et Spes, 69). This has direct consequences for the problem at hand. It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. 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 characterised by mutual interdependence.

***Centessimus Annus*, 1991,**

37. Equally worrying is *the ecological question* which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. Man, who discovers his capacity to

transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannised than governed by him.

52. This may mean making important changes in established life-styles, in order to limit the waste of environmental and human resources, thus enabling every individual and all the peoples of the earth to have a sufficient share of those resources. In addition, the new material and spiritual resources must be utilised which are the result of the work and culture of peoples who today are on the margins of the international community, so as to obtain an overall human enrichment of the family of nations.

Benedict XVI - *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009

48. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. 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 recognises 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. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation.

51. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.

World Day of Peace, 2010

4. 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.

6. Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. Once man, instead of acting as God's co-worker, sets himself up in place of God, he ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, 'which is more tyrannised than governed by him'. Man thus has a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it.

7. To protect the environment, and to safeguard natural resources and the climate, there is a need to act in accordance with clearly-defined rules... while at the same time taking into due account the solidarity we owe to those living in the poorer areas of our world and to future generations.

10. The ecological problem must be dealt with not only because of the chilling prospects of environmental degradation on the horizon; the real motivation must be the quest for authentic world-wide solidarity inspired by the values of charity, justice and the common good. For that matter, as I have stated elsewhere, 'technology is never merely technology. It reveals man and his aspirations towards development; it expresses the inner tension that impels him gradually to overcome material limitations. Technology in this sense is a response to God's command to till and keep the land (cf. Gen 2:15) that he has entrusted to humanity, and it must serve to reinforce the covenant between human beings and the environment, a covenant that should mirror God's creative love.

12. Responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction.

Pope Francis - *Laudato Si*, 2015

14. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents."

42. Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another."

64. If the simple fact of being moves people to care for the environment of which they are a part, Christians in their turn realise that their responsibility within creation, and their duty toward nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith."

66. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations."

75. The best way to restore men and women to their rightful place...is to speak once more of the figure of a Father who creates and who alone owns the world."

76. A spirituality which forgets God as all-powerful and Creator is not acceptable."

84. Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.

85. God has written a precious book, whose letters are the multitude of created things. From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine. Alongside revelation in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of night. This contemplation of creation allows us to discover in each thing a teaching which God wishes to hand on to us, since "for the believer, to contemplate creation is to hear a message, to listen to a paradoxical and silent voice".

118. There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology.

155. Acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father...thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation“.

217. What [we] need is an ecological conversion, whereby the effects of [our] encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in [our] relationship with the world around [us]. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.

Laudate Deum - 2023

13. Regrettably, the climate crisis is not exactly a matter that interests the great economic powers, whose concern is with the greatest profit possible at minimal cost.

16. We are now unable to halt the enormous damage we have caused. We barely have time to prevent even more tragic damage.

21. Artificial intelligence and the latest technological innovations start with the notion of a human being with no limits, whose abilities and possibilities can be infinitely expanded thanks to technology. In this way, the technocratic paradigm monstrously feeds upon itself.

61. I cannot fail in this regard to remind the Catholic faithful of the motivations born of their faith [which] sheds light on our relationship to others and with creation as a whole.

62. The Bible tells us: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (*Gen* 1:31). His is “the earth with all that is in it” (*Deut* 10:14). For this reason, he tells us that, “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants” (*Lev* 25:23). Hence, “responsibility for God's earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world”. [...]

64. Jesus “was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attraction full of fondness and wonder. As he made his way throughout the land, he often stopped to contemplate the beauty sown by his Father, and invited his disciples to perceive a divine message in things”

66. God has united us to all his creatures. Nonetheless, the technocratic paradigm can isolate us from the world that surrounds us.

68. Let us stop thinking, then, of human beings as autonomous, omnipotent and limitless, and begin to think of ourselves differently, in a humbler but more fruitful way.

71. Efforts by households to reduce pollution and waste, and to consume with prudence, are creating a new culture. The mere fact that personal, family and community habits are changing is contributing to greater concern about the unfulfilled responsibilities of the political sectors and indignation at the lack of interest shown by the powerful. Let us realise, then, that even though this does not immediately produce a notable effect from the quantitative standpoint, we are helping to bring about large processes of transformation rising from deep within society.

73. Praise God” is the title of this letter. For when human beings claim to take God’s place, they become their own worst enemies.

Hope and Act with creation , 2024

4. The entire universe and every creature therein groans and yearns "impatiently" for its present condition to be overcome and its original state to be restored. Our liberation thus includes that of all other creatures who, in solidarity with the human condition, were placed under the yoke of slavery.

Creation itself, like humanity, was enslaved, albeit through no fault of its own, and finds itself unable to fulfil the lasting meaning and purpose for which it was designed. It is subject to dissolution and death, aggravated by the human abuse of nature. At the same time, the salvation of humanity in Christ is a sure hope also for creation, for, "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21).

Consequently, thanks to Christ's redemption, it is possible to contemplate in hope the bond of solidarity between human beings and all other creatures.

5. In our hopeful and persevering expectation of the glorious return of Jesus, the Holy Spirit keeps us, the community of believers, vigilant; he continually guides us and calls us to conversion, to a change in lifestyle in order to resist the degradation of our environment and to engagement in that social critique which is above all a witness to the real possibility of change. This conversion entails leaving behind the arrogance of those who want to exercise dominion over others and nature itself, reducing the latter to an object to be manipulated, and instead embracing the humility of those who care for others and for all of creation. "When human beings claim to take God's place, they become their own worst enemies" (Laudate Deum, 73), for Adam's sin has tainted our fundamental relationships, namely with God, with ourselves, with one another and with the universe. All these relationships need to be integrally restored, saved and "put right". None of them can be overlooked, for if even one is lacking, everything else fails.

6. To hope and act with creation, then, means above all to join forces and to walk together with all men and women of good will. In this way, we can help to rethink, "among other things, the question of human power, its meaning and its limits. Our power has frenetically increased in a few decades. We have made impressive and awesome technological advances, yet we have not realised that at the same time we have turned into highly dangerous beings, capable of threatening the lives of many beings and our own survival.

A prayer for our earth from *Laudato Si*, 2015

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe and in the smallest of your creatures.

You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.

Pour out upon us the power of your love, that we may protect life and beauty.

Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters, harming no one.

O God of the poor,

help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this earth, so precious in your eyes.

Bring healing to our lives,
that we may protect the world and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts
of those who look only for gain
at the expense of the poor and the earth.
Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognise that we are profoundly united
with every creature
as we journey towards your infinite light.
We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle
for justice, love and peace. Amen.