

«PROTECTING THE WHOLE OF CREATION»

A service that the Bishop of Rome is called to carry out

La Civiltà Cattolica 2015 II 537-551 | 3960

In 1971 in his Apostolic Letter marking the 80th anniversary of the publication of *Rerum novarum*, Blessed Paul VI prophetically invited all the faithful to turn to «new perceptions» in which «the Christian must turn to these new perceptions in order to take on responsibility, together with the rest of men, for a destiny which from now on is shared by all». The new perceptions indicated by the Pope are those of a «wide-ranging social problem that concerns the entire human family» and were addressed in the paragraph entitled *The Environment*.

How has the Church understood the concern about ecology and the topic of the environment in these last 50 years? What is the message of the Magisterium about an issue that has become more and more pressing and which, thanks to the Encyclical of Pope Francis, is now becoming an important chapter in the social teaching of the Church?

The Pontiff said during the homily of the inaugural Mass of his Petrine ministry, March 19, 2013: «To protect the whole of creation [...] is a service that the Bishop of Rome is called to carry out».

* * *

Responsibility for a common destiny. In such stately language, which could seem antiquated, almost half a century ago, Paul VI wrote with foresight and wisdom and with a view to the future: «While the horizon of man is thus being modified according to the images that are chosen for him, another transformation is making itself felt, one which is the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human

activity. 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» (*Octogesima Adveniens* n. 21).

Thus the irrational exploitation of nature not only seriously damages the environment, but also poses a serious human social problem. The basic message of Pope Paul VI, largely unheeded by economic and political decision-makers for decades, needs to be repeated and emphasized even today.

In many societies, from the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s, awareness of ecological threats grew consistently and progressively. Saint John Paul II was the first pope to talk about the consequences of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs.

Many years later, it was Pope Benedict XVI who spoke about the growing ecological awareness in those years before the German Federal Parliament. During his apostolic visit to Germany on September 22, 2011 he said: «The emergence of the ecological movement in Germany politics starting in the 1970s, although perhaps not opening wide the windows, nevertheless was and still is a cry for fresh air, a cry that cannot be ignored or put aside because there is too much irrationality. Young people have come to realize that something is wrong in our relationship with nature; that matter is not just raw material for us to shape at will, but that the earth has a dignity of its own and that we must follow its directives». And he continued, confirming the timeliness of those questions. «When, in our relationship with reality, there is something which is not right, then we all have to reflect seriously on all of it and we all have to go back to the question about the foundations of our culture».

* * *

Saint John Paul II: environmental ecology and human ecology. Saint John Paul II – sensitive to the signs of the times – expressed this

sensitivity in his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (SRS) (December 30, 1987), stating that «one must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos». He specified the biblical roots of the ecological question, showing that «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” (*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» (SRS, 34).

At the end of the 1980s the Pope warned of using natural resources, some of which are not renewable, as if they were inexhaustible. And, furthermore in industrialization, he saw a risk of contaminating the environment and for the quality of life (*ibid*).

In particular, his message for the XXIII World Day for Peace was entirely centered on the theme *Peace with God the Creator. Peace with all of creation* (January 1, 1990). His thought was clearly expressed: «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 the environment» (WDP, 6).

In this Message he is speaking of global warming and the effects of climate change even before the terms entered into common use. It states a true «*right to a safe environment*, as a right that should be part of an updated Charter of Human Rights» (*italics ours*). Above all he speaks of «the urgent *moral need for a new solidarity*, especially among developing countries and highly developed countries» (*italics ours*). John Paul II states that States should demonstrate solidarity but also «complementarity» in promoting the development of a natural and social environment that is both peaceful and healthy. In fact the less developed countries «cannot ask to apply be asked to apply restrictive environmental standards to their emerging industries unless the industrialized States first apply them within

their own boundaries». Ecology cannot be thought of outside of the terms of justice.

In his Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (CA) (May 1, 1991), John Paul II themed the «ecological question», linking it closely to the problem of consumerism and what he called an «anthropological error»: «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*, unfortunately 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 tyrannized than governed by him» (italics ours).

The Holy Father then posed a sharp contrast between the «narrowness of man's outlook, motivated by a desire to possess things» and the correct disposition towards the world, that «disinterested, unselfish and aesthetic attitude that is born of wonder in the presence of being and of the beauty which enables one to see in visible things the message of the invisible God who created them» (CA, n. 37; italics ours).

The ecological question was already posed by John Paul II in a broader perspective and linked to the more complex *human environment*. His objective was that of *safeguarding the moral conditions for an authentic «human ecology»* (CA, 38). The attention «to preserve the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction must go hand in hand with respect for the natural and moral structure, of which man was endowed. In this context, mention should be made of the serious problems of modern urbanization, of the need for urban planning which is

concerned with how people are to live, and of the attention which should be given to a “social ecology” of work». The Pope spoke of the need to have courage and patience to destroy the structures contrary to the human environment and to «replace them with more authentic forms of living in community» (ibid).

The Encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (EV) of March 25, 1995 will firmly assert that we men «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» (EV, 42). The ecological crisis is understood as a mirror of a moral crisis. Successively, in 1997, speaking to the participants of a Congress on the environment and health, the Pope relaunched the appeal «to combine the new scientific abilities with a strong ethical dimension» in order to promote the environment not just as «resource», but above all as «home» to live in.

Very concisely, Saint John Paul II established the parameters of the thoughts of the Church on this relatively new worrisome challenge. To destroy environmental harmony is a sin, since it alienates human beings from themselves and from the earth. Central to this is the «relationship» between humanity and the rest of creation, which must be nurtured with love and wisdom. The environmental crisis is not only scientific and technological; it is basically moral.

From the Message *Peace with God the Creator. Peace with all Creation* in 1990 and the Rio Conference in 1992, the discussion has gone on for 25 years. Certainly, the issues at stake are complex: above all at the scientific level, then political and finally at the economic and commercial level.

We should recall that an important phase of this reflection has been established by the measures and pioneering ecological initiatives introduced by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I since 1994, for example, the international symposia and seminars on the island of Patmos. In 1997 in a very clear and convincing way, he made explicit the implications of the ecological question in terms of sin: «To commit a crime against the natural world, is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands;

for humans to injure other humans with disease; for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances: these are sins» (Patriarch Bartholomew I, *Speech at the Symposium on the Environment*, Santa Barbara, USA, November 8, 1997).

* * *

Benedict XVI: Discernment and Planning. Pope Ratzinger was often defined as the «first green Pope» (see, for example, *National Geographic*, February 28, 2013), having addressed many environmental and ecological issues inherited from his predecessor and then developing them further.

542

In his Message for the XL World Day of Peace (January 1, 2007), Benedict XVI takes and combines the inseparable trio of «natural ecology», human ecology» and «social ecology». In his Message the link between the ecological issue and the fact that in some areas of the planet there are still backward conditions in which development is practically blocked also due to the rise in energy prices. The Pope asks: «What will happen to those peoples? What kind of development or non-development will be imposed on them by the scarcity of energy supplies? What injustices and conflicts will be provoked by the race for energy sources? And what will be the reaction of those who are excluded from this race?».

Pope Benedict used the same questioning tone in the Message for the World Day of Peace in 2010: «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? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of “environmental refugees”, people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it – and often their possessions as well – in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources?».

These questions of the «green Pope» – which in themselves could be a list of issues to be addressed – have a profound impact on the exercise of human rights, such as the right to life, food, health and development.

Certainly, the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (CV) (June 29, 2009) was a fundamental step in his «green» thought which put numerous areas together: ecological, juridical, economic, political, cultural (CV 48). In fact, nature, especially in our time, «is so integrated in the social and cultural dynamic that it is hardly an independent variable» (CV 50). Benedict XVI warned of the hoarding of nonrenewable energy resources and recalled the urgency for a renewed solidarity leading to «a worldwide redistribution of energy resources, so that countries lacking those resources can have access to them» (CV 49). Here is his plea: «On this earth there is room for everyone: here the entire human family must find the resources to live with dignity, through the help of nature itself — God’s gift to his children — and through hard work and creativity» (CV 50).

Therefore, at the General Audience of August 26, 2009 Benedict XVI reiterated that «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». Therefore, it is essential that the current model of global development be transformed through a greater, and shared, acceptance of responsibility for creation: this is demanded not only by environmental factors, but also by the scandal of hunger and human misery». The Pope’s proposal is to do it in such a way that the actual crisis becomes «*an opportunity for discernment and new strategic planning*». The same technique can be considered as an ally because it expresses the aspirations of human development and gradually to overcome material limitations, taking on the mandate to «cultivate and care for the earth» that God has entrusted to humanity (see n. 10).

Benedict XVI reiterated that the ecological question regards Christians precisely as people of faith, and the Church as such: «*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» (see n. 51).

* * *

Francis: custody and harmony. For two years, since the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Francis has added his voice, the voice of the universal Church, to the worldwide discussion. With his efficacious and direct language he has not hesitated in affirming: «For the most part, it is human beings who abuse nature constantly. We have in some sense begun to lord it over nature, sister earth, mother earth. I remember, you have already heard this, what an old farmer once told me: “God always forgives, we men and women sometimes forgive, but nature never forgives”. If you abuse her, she gives it back to you» (Press Conference of Pope Francis onboard the flight from Colombo to Manila during his apostolic journey to Sri Lanka and the Philippines, 15 January 2015).

In his teaching, a holistic and global vision is clearly evident from the outset, a vision which is consistent with his predecessors. Human beings, nature and the environment, creation and society are interconnected: «Human and environmental ecology go hand in hand» (General Audience, 5 June 2013).

Reading his work, one notices, in particular, that Francis has an anthropological vision, but not an anthropocentric vision in the reductive sense of the term. One of his keywords is «harmony», much wider in meaning than reconciliation and which is extendable to all creatures. In fact, harmony belongs to all creation as a whole and to the relationships between living things; and is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, a gift from God.

Thus, Francesco asserted at the general audience April 22 2015, the day on which «Earth Day» was celebrated: «I urge all to look at the world through the eyes of the Creator: the Earth is an environment to protect and a garden to cultivate. May the relationship between man and nature not be driven by greed, to manipulate and exploit, but may *the divine harmony between beings and creation* be conserved in the logic of respect and care, so as to be

placed at the service of brothers and sisters, of future generations as well» (our italics).

This broad vision, attentive of the «relationships» and not only to man understood as «the center», questions what is the impact of economic progress, new technologies and the financial system on humans and the environment: «And the peril is grave, - he continued in the general Audience - because the cause of the problem is not superficial but deeply rooted. It is not merely a question of economics but of ethics and anthropology. The Church has frequently stressed this; and many are saying: yes, it is right, it is true... but the system continues unchanged since what dominates are the dynamics of an economy and a finance that are lacking in ethics. It is no longer man who commands, but money, money, cash commands. And God our Father gave us the task of protecting the earth — not for money, but for ourselves: for men and women. We have this task! Nevertheless men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: it is the “culture of waste”».

One of Pope Francis' key concepts, which he has repeated on several occasions since the inaugurating Mass of his Petrine ministry, is «custody» of the earth, with reference on one hand to God's creative «Let there be!», and on the other, the praise of creation of Francis of Assisi. In fact, it was with these words that the Pope commenced his Pontificate March 19, 2013: «The vocation of being a “protector”, however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live». From here the invitation: «Let us be “protectors” of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment. Let us not allow omens of destruction and death to accompany the advance of this world!». The «dominion» on earth that God guarantees to man is not that of the master, who is God, Lord of heaven and the earth, but that of the stewardship and administrator. Good administrators treat nature with respect,

creating a plain and simple lifestyle, which will help to preserve the environment for future generations.

Pope Francis picked up on these first words as Pontiff in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (EG) (November 24, 2013): «We human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures. Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. Let us not leave in our wake a swath of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations» (EG 215). The condemnation of the system «which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits» unmovable because in it «whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule» (EG 56). Therefore « this is the first answer to the first creation: to safeguard Creation, make it grow» (Homely, *Working with God*, St. Marta, 9 February 2015).

Adding to the voice of his predecessors - and in the specific form of the Encyclical -, Pope Francis has raised questions and reasoning. We trust that many, accepting the challenge in terms of faith and operational decisions, are deeply grateful for the fact that a world leader has had the courage to call upon everyone for a more sustainable and inclusive future. And Francis' call is not at all feeble, but severe, as it was on the occasion of the Lima Conference (27 November 2014): «The time to find global solutions is running out. We can find appropriate solutions only if we act together and in agreement. There is therefore a clear, definitive and urgent ethical imperative to act».

* * *

The Church is not a «green NGO». There are a few who debate whether the Church in general, and specifically the Pope, should enter the debate at all. Those most opposed to certain scientific findings on climate change also seem most in favour of the continued exploitation of fossil fuels. It could be argued

that the Pope has more important things to worry about than the environment. His task as pastor should be the salvation of souls. Some may think that faith is an optional add-on to ecological commitment. That is like saying that the foundation is an optional add-on for a building. For it is by faith we know that we are creatures, not the accidental or fortuitous products of blind forces or chance coincidences.

This concern does not turn the Church into a «green NGO». On the contrary, we must repeat with the Council that humanity today «raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity. Therefore, because of this it is necessary to commence dialoguing on all of these problems bringing «to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder. For the human person deserves to be preserved; human society deserves to be renewed» (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 3).

Concern for human and environmental ecology shows a fundamental dimension of faith as it is lived today for the salvation of man and the construction of social living. It emerges as part of the social doctrine of the Church. Today, therefore, the time has come for an entire Encyclical Letter on the ecological theme and no longer just a few paragraphs dealing with it.

So many things are «known» by us about the environment. Much research has been conducted. And even if we do not agree on some of the findings, the pollution of rivers and lakes, the monocultures destroying ground and livelihood, the death of so many species caused by human «progress», all these things are obvious and need the attention of the faithful. All of these analyses are to be seen by the believer from a Christian perspective. Ever since the 1990 Message of Saint John Paul II, the question is no longer whether or not Catholics should address issues of ecology in a faith perspective. The real question facing all societies, including Christian communities, is *how* we should do it.

* * *

The importance of the Encyclical in the ongoing global process. For its part, science has done its best, collecting as much data as possible, collaborating amongst many specializations, pooling their competences, arriving at their consensus and giving their advice. For example, is climate change man-made (anthropogenic)? Or is it a cyclical process of nature? Or is it probably due to both? And, whatever the causes, is there something to be done? What is not contested is that our planet is getting warmer.

Indeed, the November 2014 Synthesis Report of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, is very stark. In the words of Thomas Stocker, the co-chair of IPCC Working Group 1: «Our assessment finds that the atmosphere and oceans have warmed, the amount of snow and ice has diminished, the sea level has risen and the concentration of carbon dioxide has increased to a level unprecedented in at least the last 800,000 years» (<http://www.un.org>). This is the consensus of over 800 scientists of the IPCC, and represents an enormous challenge. Now it is up to everyone, the majority being non-scientists, to reach a conclusion and follow through. Just like most of us, Pope Francis faces the challenge, in preparing his encyclical, of properly appreciating the scientific consensus about climate change, its causes and consequences, and the needed remedies. The world's leading religious leader will draw upon his faith, upon the teaching of the Church, and upon the best information and advice available, demonstrating how each of us can manage gather and sift the information, to judge, to decide and, finally, to act. His goal is not to speculate nor to support this or that theory, but to invite people of goodwill to consider thoroughly their responsibility for future generations, and to act accordingly. Believers have an additional reason to be good stewards of the gift of creation, because they know that it is a gift from God. It is not necessary for us to be climate scientists to fulfil our environmental responsibilities as believers who inhabit the earth. The debate will then be welcome. Here we are not dealing with a campaign to save some rare species of animal or plant, which is of itself something important, but to ensure that hundreds of millions of people have

clean water to drink and clean air to breathe. This is a serious moral responsibility which we can no longer remove ourselves from. Failure to respond would be a sin of omission.

The timing of the new encyclical is significant: 2015 is a critical year for humanity. In July, nations will gather for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development in Addis Ababa. In September, the U.N. General Assembly should agree on a new set of sustainable development goals running until 2030. In December, the Climate Change Conference in Paris will receive the plans and commitments of each Government to slow or reduce global warming. The months of 2015 are crucial, then, for decisions about care for or stewardship of the earth, about effective commitment to international development and human flourishing. This is why the Holy Father affirmed once again during his flight to Manila: «The important thing is that there be a bit of time between the issuing of the encyclical and the meeting in Paris, so that it can make a contribution.... Let's hope that in Paris the delegates will be more courageous and will move forward with this».

The question now is: what kind of condition do the challenges of ecology and climate change place us ask of us? «A moment of doom» one could say: man's greed, stupidity, carelessness and pride have caused so much irreversible damage that we find ourselves at the very edge of self-destruction. Humanity destroys the planet, its only home.

Maybe there is another way of looking at the current moment. Until recently, nature with its powerful forces and mysterious processes, seemed to be entirely "in charge", with the human family at its mercy, struggling to survive and eke out a living. While this is still true for the majority, the vulnerable majority, nevertheless as a whole the human family is being impelled, by the climate crisis, to grow up and take on a new kind and level of responsibility. Benedict XVI spoke of a good opportunity for discernment and new strategic planning. For the first time, in a mature way, we have to exercise a common responsibility for the earth, our common home.

We consider it appropriate to repeat today what *La Civiltà Cattolica* wrote about a quarter of a century ago: «Ultimately it

is only by humbly looking inward, to face the hidden darkness of our being, will we find the courage and resources to be compassionate with others, with future generations, with the earth and all its creatures. Only by acknowledging and accepting our inner brokenness and hurt will our seemingly unassailable desire for power, comfort and domination quietly lose its hold. Viewed thus, the environmental problem is seen as fundamentally a human problem, one of constant conversion and authentic humanisation» («La Conferenza Mondiale di Rio: Su ambiente e sviluppo», in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 1992 IV 560-77).

* * *

Searching for the ecological implications of our faith. Never before in history has the Holy Father and the Church been such a relevant factor in such a vast global process underway. More generally, it is true today that «religion» as Patriarch Bartholomew said when interviewed for our magazine «is arguably the most pervasive and powerful force on earth. For, not only does faith play a pivotal role in people's personal lives, but it also plays a critical role as a force of social and institutional mobilization.» (A. Spadaro, «Interview with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I», in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2015 II 3-16). And because of this, ecology is a deeply ecumenical (ibid, 11 s) and also inter-religious issue, as the Pope himself acknowledged during the flight to Manila on January 15, 2015. At the close of the Rio Summit in 1992, our magazine affirmed the spiritual and religious importance of the ecological theme: «Humanity's spiritual resources are many and deeply rooted. Only by courageously probing the richness of the religious traditions of the world will humanity ever hope to attain the moral and religious insight and vision to effectively step forward together on the common path of earth and human salvation. This will be a common venture, one that will demand a courageous, lived universalism as we attempt the bold task of critical self-questioning in the search for the ecological implications of our faith» (J. McCarthy, «La Conferenza Mondiale di Rio...»).

This spiritual and religious approach (see G. Salvini, «Scienza e religioni di fronte all'ambiente», in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2002 III 151-163) matters radically for Christians. At the offertory of every Eucharist, the celebrant says, «Blessed are you, Lord God of all Creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you, fruit of the earth and work of human hands. It will become for us the bread of life». This familiar prayer expresses the dynamic relationships in which we exist and act, receive and give, pray and work. In these words we have the whole universe, the fruitful earth and a bit of bread, God's generosity and human work and our offering.

For the believer, ours is a «divine environment», namely a world interpreted as a place of union with God, acknowledged in a Christicly manner and lived at the level of faith. There should be a rediscovery of an «eucharistic vision of the world» in the manner in which it is proposed to us, for example, by the Metropolitan of Pergamon (cf. I. Zizioulas, *Il creato come eucaristia. Approccio teologico al problema dell'ecologia*, Magnano [Bi], Qiqajon, 1994). Pope Francis' commitment urges us on towards an ecological spirituality, towards a spiritual and sacramental life which is not divorced from the fact that we live in the created world.

In anticipation of the publication of Pope Francis' Encyclical Letter, we are supported in the knowledge that «the Spirit acts in each of the elements of the cosmos, fills all the universe with the glory and power of God, and moves our hearts with enthusiasm for all that is creative, good, just and noble» (*The Churches Responsibility*, Letter from the Council World Church, 1992).

La Civiltà Cattolica