

**THE CALL OF CREATION: GOD'S INVITATION AND THE  
HUMAN RESPONSE**

*The Natural Environment and Catholic Social Teaching*

**2002**

## **I. Introduction**

It has become clear that care for the environment presents a major challenge for the whole of humanity in the 21st Century. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales wishes to add its voice to the many calling for urgent action to protect our earthly home from further destruction. A way of life that disregards and damages God's creation, forces the poor into greater poverty, and threatens the right of future generations to a healthy environment and to their fair share of the earth's wealth and resources, is contrary to the vision of the Gospel.

The environmental crisis is especially complex since it involves not only many branches of scientific knowledge, but also politics and economics. The Church recognises and respects the 'autonomy of earthly affairs' in all these disciplines (Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 1965, Section 36). Its own task is to 'read the signs of the times' and uncover the spiritual and moral issues that lie at the root of the challenges of our time.

Care for the environment is fundamental to the universal good, since the health and well-being of all life depends on a healthy environment. The full human development of every human person both now and in future generations cannot be separated from the fate of the earth.

In Catholic social teaching the concept of the common good 'implies that every individual, no matter how high or low, has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community as well as a right to benefit from that welfare' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching, 1996, Section 70). Therefore, if the environmental crisis affects us all each of us has the responsibility to play our part in addressing that crisis. What is happening to the earth indicates that we must think beyond local and national interests and define 'the community' in global terms. The way we live and the choices we make affect the lives of others: not only human life, in fact, but also the other forms of life found on the earth. In 1983 the Catholic Bishops of the USA, referring to the nuclear threat, wrote, 'We are the first generation since Genesis with the power to threaten the created order'. Today we are threatened by the disregard of a minority for the manner in which its way of life affects the rest of the world.

The Bishops' Conference offers these reflections to all people of goodwill, particularly to Catholics, Christians of other denominations, and followers of those other religions that recognise the earth as the gift of a loving Creator. The task before us is 'the shared problem of the human race' (Common Good, Section 106) and therefore demands the united effort of all humanity.

## **II. What have we done to the earth?**

Damage to the environment affects every part of creation. Hardly a day goes by without some mention of these matters by radio, television and newspapers. For many people, this volume of information can be bewildering, since the issues are so wide-ranging, and many do not at first sight concern us here in England and Wales. The problems can be grouped into four main areas.

### **Damage to the earth's life-sustaining mechanisms**

The natural world is made up of many different delicate and intricately interconnected cycles that have nurtured and sustained life for millions of years,

giving fertile soil, clean water and a pure atmosphere. Now these life-sustaining mechanisms are breaking down through pollution and abuse. In many places fresh water once teeming with life is dead, beautiful coasts have been turned into sewers, fertile soil lies barren or has turned into desert. Forests, often described as the lungs of the earth, are reduced to wasteland, and cities are choked with smog. Emissions of 'greenhouse gases' continue to affect the atmosphere in ways that threaten the balance of life on the planet. The resulting climate change could severely disrupt the lives of all of humankind.

### **Depletion of the world's natural resources**

Our wealth and our way of life depend on the raw materials that are earth's gifts to us. Everything we produce and consume derives from these raw materials. Yet these finite resources are being exploited as if they remained available in infinite quantities. In the last forty years of the twentieth century, world consumption of metals, minerals and other materials more than doubled. Scarcities arising from the depletion of non-renewable natural resources threaten international stability as well as those who immediately depend on them.

### **The impact on the world's poor**

Environmental destruction and social injustice often go hand-in-hand. Damage to the environment will almost inevitably affect the poor most of all, since poor communities inevitably inhabit the worst and most vulnerable locations. What is more, 80% of the world's resources are commandeered by the richest 20% of the world's population. In other words, we in affluent countries take far more than our fair share of the world's goods. Much of our consumption becomes waste almost immediately. Meanwhile, 20% of humanity remains destitute, lacking even the basic necessities of clean water, adequate food, shelter and clothing.

One key principle of Catholic social teaching is that of the 'universal destination of material goods'. In the fourth century, the great bishop St Ambrose, citing the Gospel of Luke, wrote as follows:

If God's providence bestows an unfailing supply of food on the birds of the air who neither sow nor reap, we ought to realise that the reason for people's supply running short is human greed. The fruits of the earth were given to feed all without distinction and nobody can claim any particular rights. Instead, we have lost the sense of the communion of goods, rushing to turn these goods into private property. (St Ambrose, On the Gospel of St Luke)

The right to private ownership, therefore, has strict limits, set in particular by the urgent need of others. The environment is a prime example of a good that is essentially shared, and is not to be monopolised by powerful individuals and groups.

### **The loss of beauty and diversity**

Human activity has always shaped its environment, including many places now considered areas of great 'natural beauty'. But more recently economic growth, technology, urbanisation and the shift in land-ownership from small farmers to powerful corporations have magnified the scale of this human impact. Grasslands and forests are destroyed for commercial gain, the oceans are over-exploited, species become extinct. Our need for beauty and our communion with the other creatures of the earth are also denied.

### **III. Understanding the 'signs of the times'**

The environmental crisis has revealed the interdependence of all creation. Whatever we do, whatever choices we make, other people and the earth itself are affected. The symptoms of distress that have been outlined indicate that many human beings have lost an understanding of their true place in creation. By regarding the natural world merely as the 'setting' in which we live, and by treating the gifts of creation solely for the satisfaction of our supposed needs as consumers, we have become alienated from the earth and from each other, and so also from God. As Pope John Paul II put it in his message for World Peace Day in 1990, 'The gravity of the ecological situation reveals how deep is the human moral crisis' (Section 13). To recover health and harmony these broken relationships must be restored and healed.

The plight of the earth demonstrates that an individualistic materialism cannot be allowed to drive out responsibility and love, and that care for those in need, and respect for the rights of future generations, are necessary to sustain a proper life for all.

It is encouraging, though, that many people already recognise these deeper implications. In Seoul in 1990 the World Council of Churches called all Christians to embrace the cause of 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation' and to work to achieve a sustainable way of life. Many Christian Churches, and people from other religious traditions and from none, have advocated a new attitude towards the environment, and recent popes have echoed the words of St Ambrose, quoted above, by stressing that the earth and its resources are given for the whole of humankind, including future generations, not just for the privileged few of today. An organisation such as CAFOD makes no grant for development or humanitarian work without considering its environmental implications. All these persons represent an 'ecological conversion which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. Man is no longer the Creator's "steward" but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss' (Pope John Paul II, 19 January 2001 to a general audience in St Peter's Square). The Pope continued, 'At stake, then, is not only a physical ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of various living beings, but also a human ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations and by preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity with the Creator's plan'.

### **IV. Rediscovering moral and scriptural foundations**

Christians see the world through the lens of faith. Our responses to the environmental crisis will therefore draw on our own moral and religious foundations, as well as on other rich traditions of faith.

#### **Creation has value in itself**

We believe that God is the Creator of everything there is and that this creation is good, reflecting God's own goodness (Genesis 1-2). God loves creation for its own sake, and God's love holds everything in existence for its own mysterious purpose (Psalms 104:29-30). Creation has its own relationship with God, in some measure independently of humankind and beyond human understanding: it glorifies and worships God in continuous praise (Psalms 96:12; Isaiah 55:12). Our destructiveness can silence creation's song of praise to God, our care for creation can be a true expression of our own praise. Such a perspective challenges any narrowly economic view that the gifts of creation have value except as a 'factor of production'.

### **Creation has value because it reveals God**

The Creator's 'eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (Romans 1:20). Nature reveals God to us and allows us to experience God's presence. For example, people of faith have testified that nature's abundance and beauty reveals God's generosity and majesty, its healing, nourishing and life-giving properties reveal divine reconciling love. In the thirteenth century, St Thomas Aquinas argued that the diversity of the extraordinary array of creatures roaming the earth revealed the richness of the nature of God.

And because one single creature was not enough, he produced many diverse creatures, so that what was wanting in one expression of the divine goodness might be supplied by another; for goodness, which in God is single and all together, in creatures is multiple and scattered. Hence the whole universe less incompletely than one alone shares and represents his goodness' (Summa Theologica, ia 47.1).

When we allow creation to be degraded and damaged, therefore, we lose our sense of God's very self.

Jesus points to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air as beautiful in their own right ('Not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of these') but also as revealing the care of God for all beings (Matthew 6: 26-30), a care that can liberate us from the kind of anxiety that deflects us from seeking God's kingdom first. His authority over the immense power of the sea awes the disciples who experience it, because it is only God who has sovereignty over the forces of Creation.

### **Human Beings are dependent but responsible**

Human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), and have the special gift and challenge of sharing in God's creative activity. We use, and by using we transform, the natural world. As 'co-creators', then, our acts should reflect God's own love for creation. We ourselves are part of creation, formed out of the earth, and dependent on the rest of creation for our continued existence: so we are made aware that caring for creation is part of caring for ourselves (Genesis 2:15). There is a covenant of mutual care and respect that unites God, humankind and every other living creature (Genesis 9).

### **Creation reveals human sin**

Our capacity to marvel at the earth, but also to develop and utilise its resources (for instance through the application of science and technology), has greatly enriched our lives. This human creativity carries with it a profound responsibility. However, it is also part of Christian faith to recognise that we are sinners: in our present context, this truth means that sin has distorted the human relationship with the natural world: we have disturbed the balance of nature in radical and violent ways. As Pope John Paul II has written, 'Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though the earth did not have its own requisites and a prior, God-given purpose, which man indeed can 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 in provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannised than governed by him' (Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 1991, Section 37).

Sin damages our relationships with God and with one another, the relationships between social groups, and that between humanity and the earth. As the prophets of the Old Testament testify, such sin is reflected in the earth's suffering: 'The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant' (Isaiah 24:4-5). 'Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing' (Hosea 4:2-3).

### **Creation participates in our redemption**

We live out our relationship with God as dwellers on the earth. Our use of the gifts of creation forms part of that relationship. To love God is, among other things, to give thanks and praise for these gifts, to honour and respect them for themselves, to acknowledge that they are destined by God for all people, and therefore to share the gifts of the earth justly. God constantly calls us back from sin to repentance and conversion. In thinking of the environment, we can say that the antidote to the sin of exploitative greed is found in the virtue of care and respect. It is partly in this sense that St Paul daringly argues that the earth itself shares in our redemption and salvation. 'Therefore creation too waits with eager longing...that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom and the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now' (Romans 8:19 seq).

### **Creation in the world to come**

Our present life already participates in the life to come. Jesus says, 'The Kingdom of God is among you' (Luke 17: 21), and we have been given the vision of the new heavens and the new earth as an inspiration for the present as well as a sign of hope for the future. We are partners in God's creative enterprise, called to 'renew the face of the earth' until there is peace and harmony, sparkling life-giving water, the 'trees of life' that give health and the messianic banquet that can be shared by all the inhabitants of the earth. Then 'the curse of destruction will be abolished' (Revelation 22: 1-3).

## **V. Responding to the Cry of Creation**

The cry of creation prompts us all to ask 'What then should we do?' (Luke 3:10). What is needed is 'not merely a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the hardships of many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit ourselves to the common good: that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we really are responsible for all.' (Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1988, Section 38).

### **Education towards ecological responsibility**

It is encouraging to note that environmental awareness now plays a greater part in formal education: but it is important that this education enables people gradually to take up their personal responsibilities. Education that focuses solely on the elements of science and technology cannot offer a framework of moral values to guide the daily decisions of living. We need an education that helps liberate people from enslavement to a way of life that values consumption, convenience, wealth, status and economic growth above all else, an education that begins to give them the freedom to make different choices. 'This education is not something that can be

based on emotion or vague aspirations. Its goal can be neither ideological nor political, and its programme cannot rest on a rejection of the modern world or on the vague desire to return to a "paradise lost". True education about responsibility involves a genuine conversion in the way we think and behave' (Pope John Paul II, World Peace Day Message, 1990, Section 13).

### **Personal Responsibility and Conversion of Life**

Such a change of attitude calls for a fundamentally new orientation towards the purpose of material possessions. 'It is not wrong to want to live better. What is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards having rather than being and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself.' (Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, Section 37). We are called to reflect on our individual roles and purposes in life and ask ourselves what we need to develop our human qualities, to grow in love of God and neighbour. In a context of environmental justice, this reflection will allow us to make serious choices - including the choice not to consume what we do not need and, above all, what is likely to harm others.

All religious traditions encourage simplicity of life, often even a certain austerity. In the Christian tradition, this wisdom derives from the Lord's own profound saying, 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be too' (Matthew 6: 21). The desire for affluence, for more and more possessions, for almost anything new, can begin to dominate us. In a consumerist age, the pressure exerted on us by the advertising industry and by the visibility of luxury goods all around us encourages the assumption that it is our right to use the gifts of creation entirely as we wish. It will require continuing reflection about how our habits of life can all too easily become excessive and wasteful, and how they affect the well-being of others, to counter these pressures. Nevertheless, to do so is a way of co-operating with Christ's mission to bring reconciliation and peace, and indeed can truly be a way of learning afresh to love God and our neighbour.

Individual actions may seem insignificant but together the small steps of many people can have an astonishing impact. Each person's joyful choices can be a visible example to others and give them courage to follow. Public pressure becomes powerful when it reflects a mature moral vision that respects the rights of others to a decent life now and in the future.

### **Acting in Partnership: other Churches and Faiths**

Many different groups are to be found where people come together to support and encourage each other towards environmental justice. Amongst these are numerous church-linked programmes and activities. Christians can work together ecumenically at parish level and nationally. The Environmental Issues Network of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland provides one such ecumenical forum. The network Christian Ecology Link has an active Catholic section. At a continental level there is the European Christian Environmental Network, open to all the Christian Churches. Christians can also give common witness to the value and goodness of creation with other faiths, not least Judaism and Islam which share our belief in God, the loving Creator of all that is.

### **Acting in Partnership: Civil Structures**

Recent government reports about the effects of global warming indicate the concern at the highest level about some aspects of the environmental crisis. It is encouraging that the 'Kyoto Protocol', deriving from the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change, held in Kyoto, Japan, in 1997, has now been ratified by more than seventy countries and (in June 2002) was ratified as a bloc by every state of the European Union, though it is still opposed by some important countries such as the USA and Australia. The Protocol would require states to restrict their industrial emissions so as to prevent the increase of greenhouse gases.

The wide support given to the Kyoto Protocol shows that governments can create structures that encourage and enable citizens to live in a more ecological way, for example through environmentally responsible transport systems and energy policies, by tax incentives, and by supporting the development of facilities to promote sustainable living. Since these governments have often signed the protocol under strong pressure from their own civil society, we learn, too, that with the active support and co-operation of all sectors of society real change is possible. But such results can only be achieved if electors are willing to let go of the relentless search for the maximisation of consumption, and opposition political parties, as well as the governments, refuse to allow the search for short-term political gain to block the necessary measures.

Environmental problems cross state boundaries: so governments, particularly those of the rich countries of the world, need to co-operate to develop common policies to limit environmental damage and to promote environmental protection, as well as to confront together the injustice of excessive wealth in a world where there is abject poverty. Developing countries cannot be expected to forego their own economic progress so that the rich can exploit the earth's resources unchallenged.

### **Acting in solidarity**

In September 2002 the world's nations will gather in Johannesburg for the World Summit on Sustainable Development. This crucial meeting needs our support and prayers. In his foreword to the State of the World 2002, a report from the Worldwatch Institute, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, wrote that the Johannesburg Summit 'can and must lead to a strengthened global recognition of the importance of achieving a sustainable balance between nature and the human economy'. He recognised that nations are currently at very different levels of development and therefore have different responsibilities, but face common threats and are offered common opportunities if we can 'respond to this challenge as a single human community.'

The Summit will recognise that the struggle to protect the environment has to take account of the destitution still rife in the world. It will assess the ecological implications of continued economic globalisation, and seek to give new life to the international treaties on biodiversity, climate change, forests and desertification. This agenda will present governments, but also all of us, with massive challenges: for example, climate change is not just a matter of political negotiation but confronts our every assumption about how we live our lives. The extent of the Summit's success or failure will seriously affect the future of our earth and its peoples.

At the end of their Low Week Meeting in April this year the Bishops Conference of England and Wales issued a resolution urging all Catholics to pay close and prayerful attention to this summit, and they also affirmed the teaching of Pope John Paul II that '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.' In their different ways, the Pope and the Secretary-General of the United Nations can be



understood as re-stating for our time the vital insight of St Ambrose in the fourth century.

Individual choices can seem insignificant when faced with such global challenges. But multiplied individual actions can indeed make a real difference. The Johannesburg Summit must not be allowed to fail through governments' refusal to take decisive action because they think public opinion is against them. Faith groups have the specific task of communicating to their governments the spiritual and moral foundations of sustainable living and development.

The Johannesburg Summit is the opportunity for every form of social organisation to work together: international institutions, governments, non-governmental organisations, business leaders, scientists and so on. 'In an increasingly global society, the unit of human community to which the term 'common good' applies moves from the national to the international level. Hence solidarity has an inescapable universal dimension. Solidarity requires action to protect the common good at this level, where it can only be safeguarded by the collaboration of all' (The Common Good, Section 102). It is the logic of our present argument that solidarity must, in a genuine sense, extend to nature itself, as we learn to live in ways that are consistent with its God-given laws.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Christians, particularly perhaps Catholic Christians, are reminded of the precious gifts of creation at each Eucharistic celebration. In the ancient prayer over the gifts of bread and wine we praise God our Creator, and remember that these material goods are given to us by God and are fashioned through the co-operation of Creator and creature: so our own daily living is to reflect our gratitude for the gifts that have been given to us. Again, in the Eucharist we join in the self-giving, the sacrifice, of Christ himself, and in this sense the offering of our own lives - time, convenience, money - for the good of others can itself be Eucharistic, a 'sacrifice' for the good of others. In the Eucharist we, the priestly people, the Church, are empowered to transform and use what we have been given. This act of transformation is a sacred act. But it is for all, to nourish all, for the life and salvation of all.