

Joint Declaration on Articulating a Code of Environmental Ethics

by

**Pope John Paul II
and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew**

"It is on the basis of our recognition that the world is created by God that we can discern an objective moral order within which to articulate a code of environmental ethics," Pope John Paul II and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople said in a joint declaration on the environment signed June 10. The Greek Orthodox patriarch is spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide. "We are witnessing a growth of an ecological awareness which needs to be encouraged," the two leaders said. "Ecological awareness" means "responsibility toward self, toward others, toward creation," they explained. With a live television hookup linking them, the patriarch signed the statement in Venice, Italy, while the pope signed it at the Vatican. The signing marked the end of a five-day floating symposium aboard a ship called the Festos Palace, a symposium on religion, science and the environment sponsored by the patriarch. The patriarch and 200 guests sailed from Corfu, Greece, to Venice, with stops in Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia to dialogue with local church and government leaders and to examine threatened areas of the Adriatic Sea. A code of environmental ethics should foster interdependence and stress "the principles of universal solidarity, social justice and responsibility in order to promote a true culture of life," said the joint declaration. It outlined six ethical goals related to the environment, cautioning, for example, that human mortality and weakness of judgment warn against taking "irreversible actions with what we choose to regard as our property during our brief stay on this earth" and calling for the promotion of "a peaceful approach to disagreement about how to live on this earth." The joint declaration's original language was English. The text follows.

We are gathered here today in the spirit of peace for the good of all human beings and for the care of creation. At this moment in history, at the beginning of the third millennium, we are saddened to see the daily suffering of a great number of people from violence, starvation, poverty and disease. We are also concerned about the negative consequences for humanity and for all creation resulting from the degradation of some basic natural resources such as water, air and land, brought about by an economic and technological progress which does not recognize and take into account its limits.

Almighty God envisioned a world of beauty and harmony, and he created it, making every part an expression of his freedom, wisdom and love (cf. Gn. 1:1-25). At the center of the whole of creation, he placed us, human beings, with our inalienable human dignity. Although we share many features with the rest of the living beings, Almighty God went further with us and gave us an immortal soul, the source of self-awareness and freedom, endowments that make us in his image and likeness (cf. Gn. 1:26-31; 2:7). Marked with that resemblance, we have been placed by God in the world in order to cooperate with

him in realizing more and more fully the divine purpose for creation.

At the beginning of history, man and woman sinned by disobeying God and rejecting his design for creation. Among the results of this first sin was the destruction of the original harmony of creation. 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.

God has not abandoned the world. It is his will that his design and our hope for it will be realized through our cooperation in restoring its original harmony. In our own time we are witnessing a growth of an ecological awareness which needs to be encouraged, so that it will lead to practical programs and initiatives. An awareness of the relationship between God and humankind brings a fuller sense of the importance of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, which is God's creation and which God entrusted to us to guard with wisdom and love (cf. Gn. 1:28).

Respect for creation stems from respect for human life and dignity. It is on the basis of our recognition that the world is created by God that we can discern an objective moral order within which to articulate a code of environmental ethics. In this perspective, Christians and all other believers have a specific role to play in proclaiming moral values and in educating people in ecological awareness, which is none other than responsibility toward self, toward others, toward creation.

What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo in the most radical way an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.

First, we must regain humility and recognize the limits of our powers, and most important, the limits of our knowledge and judgment. We have been making decisions, taking actions and assigning values that are leading us away from the world as it should be, away from the design of God for creation, away from all that is essential for a healthy planet and a healthy commonwealth of people. 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. Such an ethics fosters interdependence and stresses the principles of universal solidarity, social justice and responsibility in order to promote a true culture of life.

Second, we must frankly admit that humankind is entitled to something better than what we see around us. We and, much more, our children and future generations are entitled to a better world, a world free from degradation, violence and bloodshed, a world of

generosity and love.

Third, aware of the value of prayer, we must implore God the Creator to enlighten people everywhere regarding the duty to respect and carefully guard creation.

We therefore invite all men and women of good will to ponder the importance of the following ethical goals:

1. To think of the world's children when we reflect on and evaluate our options for action.
2. To be open to study the true values based on the natural law that sustain every human culture.
3. To use science and technology in a full and constructive way, while recognizing that the findings of science have always to be evaluated in the light of the centrality of the human person, of the common good and of the inner purpose of creation. Science may help us to correct the mistakes of the past in order to enhance the spiritual and material well-being of the present and future generations. It is love for our children that will show us the path that we must follow into the future.
4. To be humble regarding the idea of ownership and to be open to the demands of solidarity. Our mortality and our weakness of judgment together warn us not to take irreversible actions with what we choose to regard as our property during our brief stay on this earth. We have not been entrusted with unlimited power over creation, we are only stewards of the common heritage.
5. To acknowledge the diversity of situations and responsibilities in the work for a better world environment. We do not expect every person and every institution to assume the same burden. Everyone has a part to play, but for the demands of justice and charity to be respected the most affluent societies must carry the greater burden, and from them is demanded a sacrifice greater than can be offered by the poor. Religions, governments and institutions are faced by many different situations; but on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity, all of them can take on some tasks, some part of the shared effort.
6. To promote a peaceful approach to disagreement about how to live on this earth, about how to share it and use it, about what to change and what to leave unchanged. It is not our desire to evade controversy about the environment, for we trust in the capacity of human reason and the path of dialogue to reach agreement. We commit ourselves to respect the views of all who disagree with us, seeking solutions through open exchange, without resorting to oppression and domination.

It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with

God's help and blessing.

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