

ECOLOGY: THE BISHOPS OF LOMBARDY ADDRESS THE COMMUNITY



The Catholic Bishops of Northern Italy



Introduction

Every human being has the fundamental right to live in an environment suitable to his health and well being.¹ This declaration of basic human right shows the importance that must be attributed on a global scale to the environmental question. The problem of the relationship between man and the environment, presented to public understanding as "the ecological crisis," is one of the most acute and well publicized in modern society.² It involves scientists, economists, social workers, and scholars of ethics; governments and international organizations. It has extended beyond the confines of narrow, specialized circles of scientific experts and special interest groups to become an issue of interest, of criticism, and of evaluation throughout the population.

As it has occurred with many other themes of an ethical and social nature—such as the problems of peace, of disarmament, of the development and liberation of third

world countries, of the status of young people, of the emancipation of women, and so forth—the environmental issue is also imposing itself on Christian reflection and upon ecclesiastical sensibility; it has once and for all entered the centers of theological research and absolutely can not be separated any longer from pastoral practice.

The environmental movements then, in noteworthy manner, stir up a resounding consensus in the circles of Catholic associations, often involving the young, who are encouraged by the example of Saint Francis and the Franciscan tradition, which is interpreted as a Christian contribution toward a more ecologically oriented culture.

The pontifical teaching of John Paul II has often touched on the theme of the relationship between man and the environment, consistently emphasizing the protection and defense of human life. Here we can recall two texts which seem especially significant: the one found in no. 15 of the *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of Man), and the longer and more elaborate text of no. 34 in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Concern for Social Matters).

In this broader ecclesiastical horizon, as Bishops of the Churches of Lombardy, we believe it is opportune to make a statement in order to aid and sustain the conscience of Christians in a dutiful effort of discernment. This will also submit the grave problem of the environment's decline to critical evaluation in light of the Christian vision, which situates man at the center of the world and the environment.

With this perspective, the attentive Christian conscience becomes important for the ecological cause. The Christian conscience must assume a critical and culturally informed view, equally avoiding quick clichés from the mass media or stereotyped assumptions about the religious texts typically associated with a Christian vision of creation.

Despite the simplifications in the mass media, the issues of ecology show themselves to be of great complexity. The seriousness of the ecological predicament leads discussion toward a reevaluation of the form of Western civilization, and it opens the door to a critique of society, both theoretical and practical, which seeks to find alternative ways of living.

The complexity of this question can be compared to a variety of topics which can be considered theoretically and addressed practically. Let us focus in particular upon areas of social and political activity, of moral conscience for the individual person, and of the perspective of the Church itself. Among these diverse areas, one senses that an active discussion should occur, but without blurring or neglecting necessary distinctions.

In the framework of such a complexity to the problems of the environment, this intervention in a Pastoral Letter by the Bishops of the Lombard Church is necessary; it is clear in its objective; and it is required by the pastoral nature of the ecological problem.

The ecological problem does not require immediate political solutions. Neither are theological theses necessary on the relationship between man and nature. What is needed is to strengthen the conscience of Christians to develop personal reflection, while at the same time maintaining a historically and socially grounded understanding of our region, and maintaining a consistent tradition of faith.

The Threatened Environment: Symptoms and Causes

1. Resource Depletion and Pollution

Man's activity often produces obvious damage to the environment. Nevertheless a false belief persists in public thinking that the environment is a fountain of almost unlimited resources. This misconception does not respect, conserve or protect nature from an arrogant exploitation by society. This belief, more or less conscious, is nonetheless operative. It is, however, confronted by the emergence of threats of impoverishment, and, in some cases, the depletion of natural resources (some non-renewable), and also by the danger in which we place numerous living species, hundreds of thousands of plants and animals, and countless micro-organisms, many of which have not yet even been studied.

This depletion affects resources that are diverse and of varied economic importance. This should be considered in relation to the real damage caused by the impoverishment of the life forms existing on the planet. This is true, not only for ecosystem equilibrium, but also for the benefits that society derives from them.

The prospect of energy resource depletion, even though it is a different situation, does not make it a problem of minor significance as it relates both to the quality of human life and to its appropriate development.

The problem of pollution or environmental deterioration is linked to the previous considerations, relating to natural resources, to existing plant and animal species, and to energy resources. This problem of pollution involves the essential components of human life—air, water and soil. Here the deteriorating and ruinous consequences are macroscopic (i.e., regional or global in effect). It is sufficient just to consider the increase of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the acid rain, the reduction of the ozone layer, and the pollution of surface waters, lakes and rivers. The waters of the rivers which border our land of Lombardy, beginning with the Po, are in various stages of degradation and despoilment, from poisoned to at least seriously deteriorated from severe environmental breakdowns.

Among the causes that have disturbed the equilibrium of the environment, three seem the most prominent: the implications of agricultural production, the increases in industrial production and the specialized trades, and the demand for energy.

Agriculture constitutes a primary influence on the environment, and in its turn, depending on circumstances, could be considered either a victim or a cause of the environmental decline.

The growth of world population has undoubtedly posed problems for the development of agriculture. For rich countries the demands of agriculture mean increasing and improving the food supply and providing greater consumer and social benefits. For poor countries, it is a problem of satisfying a basic right to a food supply, which not only allows for survival but provides for growth in a harmonious manner.

The agriculture of Lombardy can be characterized as one of high yield and high specialization. It needs however to rely upon an ever increasing use of chemical fertilizers to improve soil fertility and in some cases upon pesticides. These chemical additives have their own rationale and are understandable, but they do not succeed because they contaminate the underground aquifer and they constitute a grave hazard to our health through the food chain.

Throughout Lombardy, and not just in the centers of high productivity, there can be noted a growing industrial and service presence. This, on the one hand, indicates the industriousness of the Lombardian people, but on the other hand, it shows the necessity that capital investment cannot focus solely upon increased production because it must also combat the risks of pollution.

The demand for energy is connected to the quality of human life as a primary need. However secondary needs cannot be ignored or underestimated which are connected to the structure of society. What is necessary, therefore, is to discern among the diversity of human values placed upon energy and to determine the actual energy costs that are the result of so many different uses of energy. Thus, it becomes necessary to decide at the social and political level which types of production should be discouraged, beginning with those that constitute a source of atmospheric pollution or some other serious danger to the health of man.

With environmental questions, it is also necessary to recognize population pressures and their distribution within a region. Production levels (whether industrial or agricultural), the standard of living (level of consumption), and, consequently, the effects of waste accumulation in relation to population density are proportionate to the number of inhabitants and businesses of the area.

From these different perspectives (as indicated above), Lombardy presents a conspicuously intense picture of environmental diversity. In the past twenty years our region has been at the center of a vast influx of immigration which has caused a significant increase in population. This has brought about a notable increase in housing, new businesses, automobile traffic, means of communication, and population density, all of which is significantly greater than the Italian national average. This translates

into a greater pollution risk which calls us to a major responsibility and imposes the duty of an adequate grasp of conscience.

2. Ecology, Environment, Ideology

Faced with the gravity and complexity of the problems raised by environmental destruction, one naturally turns to the practices and methods appropriate to ecological action. Such a mandate brings us back to the needs of a healthy environment.

On the other hand, the environmental problem does not have only a scientifically measurable aspect because it also presents profound economic, social and ethical implications. For this reason, a global awareness of progress and development is inherent in a complete perspective on the relationship between man and the environment and this requires stringent and genuine discernment.

We recognize the important contribution that the scientific, ecological model offers for comprehension of the environment and its relation to human existence. From the perspective of methodology, this contribution of science requires a holistic view that does not reduce the significance of man and his destiny. The relationship between man and the environment, however, cannot be understood only through its biological dimension. Human life ultimately has a spiritual quality. Expression of this spiritual quality is liberty, which establishes man in a position of dominion over nature. The exercise of this dominion (or lordship) is not expressed only in the technical dimension, but also through safeguarding human dignity as a goal which concerns all of creation. As it proclaims in the Bible, *With glory and honor you have crowned him. . . . All things you have put under his feet.*³

These few insights are sufficient to exhort the Christian conscience to an attentive discernment of the issues amidst the multiplicity of ecological ideologies.

The urgent need for discernment manifests with particular clarity when the intricacies of politics are considered. In the first place it should be emphasized that ecological issues are not only embraced by political and environmental organizations, but they have become in varying degrees a common position of all the parties and political organizations.

On the other hand it is difficult to determine how much attention to environmental issues constitutes an appropriate amount and how much instead overemphasis risks reduction of this issue to a favorite rhetorical expedient of the mass media.

In any case it is necessary to make a careful distinction between the general approval that must be accorded to many of the social and political appeals put forth from different environmental organizations, and the disapproval that must be declared against those who attempt to use the urgency of our ecological predicament as an appeal for what are complex global, civil and political schemes.

The Relationship Between Man and the Environment

The human-environmental relationship presents complex situations to which the Christian conscience is called first to provide a clarifying principle, and then the practical responsibilities which are the consequences of those principles.

This question, when reduced to its essential elements, becomes, "In what manner should human activity alter the dynamic ecological balances so as to guarantee the survival of both the biosphere and the resources essential for human life?"

Beyond this basic question of appropriate resource utilization, the environmental crisis should be seen not just as a crisis of the land and its resources, but it should also be seen as a crisis of the underlying spiritual values.

In these days when we're accustomed to seeing only the material side of human activity, the transparency of the spiritual and eternal reality to life has become obscured. Material or economic views of nature condition a worldly attitude, both in theory and practice, about the events of society. To point out and denounce such a situation, without descending to a renewed pagan deification of nature, it is pertinent to recall briefly the Christian point of view about nature that puts faith in the teachings of the Bible.

The Blessed Earth and the Cursed Soil

*O Lord, my God, how great art thou!*⁴ The exclamation of awe, of admiration, of gratitude, bursts from the mouth of the psalmist in consideration of the cosmic spectacle. *You have established the earth on its foundations; it cannot be moved.*⁵

The stability of the earth appears as a primary and fundamental promise of God, through which is assured his faithfulness for the sake of human life. More than just stable, the earth is ordered and arranged in a manner suited for human needs. *And He molded it so that it would be inhabited,*⁶ so that the psalmist could exclaim, *You have made all things in wisdom, the earth is full of your creatures.*⁷

Besides the awed voice of the psalmist, we find in the Bible voices with a different emphasis. Among these, in particular it is worth remembering the curse of the soil pronounced following the sin of Adam: *Cursed be the soil for your sake! With the sweat of your brow you shall bring forth food all the days of your life.*⁸ Is this the same earth that was praised in the Psalm? How can these situations which are so different be reconciled? Perhaps the earth and all of creation show a different and contradictory face according to the times and places in which man comes to find himself? In our present time, the earth seems to be cursed in its stability and in its astonishing order and equilibrium because of the indiscriminate and arrogant proliferation of man's technological activities.

Technology pertains to those resources which man has acquired down through history as part of his dominion over nature—which corresponds to God's plan: *You have given them power over the works of thy hands; you have placed everything under their*

*feet, all the flocks and herds, all the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea, those that traverse the ways of deep.*⁹

The benefits that have been obtained for human life by technology and scientific research are undeniable. It is, however, necessary to be clear about the ambiguous aspects of technology. To see this clearly, one needs to correctly understand and coordinate between two different perceptions of the world that natural reality presents to human understanding: There is on the one hand that view which sees the world as a divine and God-given dwelling place, predisposed to the sustenance of human life, and on the other there is that which sees the earth as a simple inventory of material resources that awaits human enterprise to employ them effectively for the construction of a comfortable dwelling place.

To establish and clarify a few general principles, it is legitimate either to diagnose the serious dangers that threaten the environment and to itemize possible remedies to these dangers, or to itemize some ethical, cultural and political conditions for realizing solutions in practice.

Life is More than Food and Clothing

The fundamental misunderstanding that threatens the relationship between man and the resources of the earth has been denounced in a concise and penetrating manner by the Sermon on the Mount. Here the attention of the disciples is called to the model of life offered by the birds of the sky and the lilies of the field.

Concern for life, says Jesus, cannot be exchanged for the more lowly care for food, nor concern for the body with the lesser care of clothing. Is not life worth more than food and the body more than garments? This is like saying that concern for human life cannot be reduced to care for simple needs, even though gratification of those needs is an essential requirement for survival.

The gratification of bodily needs is not adequate for the fulfillment of human life. *For man does not live by bread alone; to live, man has need for the Word,*¹⁰ and therefore for a sense of hope—which modern society earnestly seeks and which the Word of God reveals in its fullness. Yet when man exhausts this yearning for the fullness of life in a pagan preoccupation with food, clothing and many other concerns, then that pure yearning is inevitably degraded into interminable anxiety, stress and unending toil.

Of greater importance than concern for food, the Sermon on the Mount points to this further consideration: the kingdom of God and its righteousness. For whoever seeks first the kingdom of God, to him shall all other things be added. *For your heavenly Father already knows your need.*¹¹ In other words, he who seeks first the kingdom of God and its righteousness shall also receive a way to take care of food and clothing in accordance with methods and means capable of accommodating and caring for the transcendence of life as primary in respect to all things.

The so-called material wealth must be recognized as real wealth only on the condition that it becomes for man's conscience a symbol and token of hoped for spiritual wealth.

Take Dominion Over the Earth and Steward It

In light of the structure for human life which biblical revelation proposes, the affirmations of Genesis, which are frequently quoted but easily misunderstood when one discusses the relationship of man with the earth, need to be restated.

God creates man in his own image, so that he might *have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and all the wild beasts and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.*¹²

Then blessing man and woman, God entrusts them with the task of "ruling" over the earth.¹³ This is a trust assigned to every generation in which man is called upon, not only to harvest the fruits of the earth, but to take care of it and to share its wealth with all peoples. The stewardship of the earth which is alluded to here must not be too quickly interpreted, almost as though it corresponded to the mastery which is realized through the power of technology. This "dominion" is laborious to accomplish, it is a "blessing," and therefore it is a gift which should inspire gratitude.

However, according to biblical tradition, the mediation of human liberty is essential in order that God's creation should realize the destiny assigned to it. But such a mediation cannot be understood in terms of the scientific-technological undertaking to have dominion over nature. Rather, this understanding consists in the ethical dimension with which man lives in relationship to nature. Further still this understanding consists in the promise of salvation which is inscribed in the earth and which God entrusts to man, and in the correspondence of his life with such a promise depending upon his obedience to His commandments.

On this point, we must conclude with the words of John Paul II: *The dominion accorded to man by the Creator is not an absolute power, nor can one speak of freedom to 'use and abuse' nor to utilize things as one pleases. The limitation imposed by the Creator from the very beginning and expressed symbolically with the prohibition against 'eating of the fruit of the tree' (Genesis 2:16) shows with sufficient clarity that in the relationship with visible nature, we are subject to laws which are not only biological, but also moral, and they may not be transgressed with impunity.*¹⁴

The Ethical Requirements in the Relationship Between Man and Nature

1. Respect, Moderation and Attention to the Quality of Life

Faced with the well-documented prospect of an earth with limited resources, emo-

tional reactions, the condemnation of progress, birth control, or the unrealistic "sylvan-pastoral" (ed. note: a "return to nature" proposal) solutions are not adequate.¹⁵

The basic principles which we have simply pointed out allow us to achieve a clearer picture of the so-called ecological crisis. The world, as it is inhabited today by Western man, appears in many ways to be a treasure in peril. The reasons for this crisis should be sought by searching much more deeply than simply by analyzing the ecosystem and its degradations. These reasons should be sought in the crisis of conscience and in the acceptance of ambiguous ethical values and the failure to fulfill the Lord's commandments. Therefore in the crisis of the environment, it is the moral certainties alone that can authorize (spiritually direct) a behavior which leads to a grace-filled and truly free way of life.

This does not involve a renunciation of development as pursued by industrial societies. What is needed is that the moral character of the relationship between man and the environment becomes recognized and that "ethically qualified" development be promoted. Appropriate development and environmental quality depend upon the exercise of ethical responsibility, as John Paul II reminds us in *Sollicitudo rei socialis*.

It is necessary therefore to remember several ethical principles which must guide the interaction of man with the environment:

The first is respect. To respect the natural environment means to steward the potential which the Creator has infused into it and out of which human interaction proceeds. The natural environment is an ordered whole, and upon this order it is willed by God that man establish his civilization. It is essential that every type of activity and alteration of the environment becomes carefully evaluated, not only on the basis of economic considerations, but also with attention to the possible risks of destruction to the environment. Respect for the environment is a gratitude toward God, and activities concerned with preserving the beauty of the natural environment are not far from being a form of praise and worship.

A second criterion is moderation. Many natural resources are nonrenewable and therefore not subject to indiscriminate exploitation. This criterion of moderation is demanded by the necessity of the common good of all humanity and particularly by concern for the developing countries, which are economically poorer. Ecological concern must become a firmly and universally embraced practice and moderation in consumption must become a sharing. It must not be forgotten that the current generation is responsible for the possibility of development by future generations and this potential would become compromised by the lack of those resources which today are improvidentially consumed.

Finally, a third criterion is attention to the quality of life. Human activity must not merely be respectful to the natural environment, but also toward the everyday living environment. Particular attention must be paid to the unrestrained urbanization of

the metropolitan periphery, to the areas with high population density, and to those which are heavily industrialized. In these areas where the highest levels of environmental pollution are caused, effluents or other ecological impacts should be measured, taking account of the consequences for the health of the population.

Now we open a vast and complex subject concerning the safety and the use of certain types of energy such as coal and nuclear power. Although judgment regarding the risks associated with these sources of energy are complex and sensitive, involving many factors of a technical and economical nature, nevertheless the morally stringent duty remains to make every effort to reduce to a minimum the possible risks. Since the health of thousands of human beings is at stake, and the integrity of future generations, prudence demands that no motive have priority over that of human safety.

2. Evangelical Conversion and the Courage of Bearing Witness

The criteria that we have indicated should inform the decisions and choices of the individual. Believers are called into this direction by the way of life which the Gospel itself demands. Faith calls for conversion and in this case, we must speak of an "ecological conversion." The degradation of the environment, as seen in light of the Word of God, is shown to be the fruit and the sign of sin. The sins against God include defiling nature which of itself also aspires to the liberty of the sons of God, which only Christ can give.

The exemplary life of Jesus in his evangelical radicalness is therefore the way which leads to a reconciliation between man and his threatened environment. The kingdom of God which Christ came to bring is also the fulfillment of a world that becomes totally transparent to its Creator. Ecological awareness, correctly understood, is no less than a dimension of Christian asceticism. It requires that individuals become aware of the problems of the environment and of the values connected to ecological healing. If necessary, it requires that they change their thinking as regards attitudes toward nature. This will lead to a style of life that is more sober, more attentive to the use of appropriate products, and more concerned about waste and the excesses of consumerism. If necessary, we should eventually accept voluntary limitations or surcharges tied to the use of certain products. Above all a sense of personal responsibility should emerge in the human community which grows in individuals and widens to worldwide proportions.

The ecological problem demands choices which lead to a global task for society. At the same time the success of this task will not be possible if individuals do not develop a new style of life. Resignation or pessimism must not be a factor. To hope is connected the courage of testimony (bearing witness). In this endeavor, Christian communities, especially the parishes, have a great responsibility: to promote and sustain ecological choices, ecological commitment, and authentically evangelical

choices. This response confronts a consumerism which leads to a suffocation of even the most developed consciences. By their nature these choices for an ecologically appropriate style of life, even if they only produce limited changes, will act as courageous and prophetic stimuli which will shake increasing levels of people and invite them to reflect on the seriousness of this situation.

Next, the Christian communities can accomplish a vital and irreplaceable mission in the education of younger generations, through the parish congregations, which are enjoying a season of renewal in our Lombardian dioceses. Through youth associations linked to nature (for example, scouting), young people can be taught about nature. More than just discussions, the very lifestyle of those youth-oriented organizations constitutes an effective means for teaching respect, care and protection of our God-created inheritance.

3. Cultural, Social and Political Responsibility

Finally, the ecological problem must bring about a commitment for a massive effort of ecological renewal with elaborate cultural, social and political ramifications. What is required is to promote a whole series of scientific research efforts which would allow us to evaluate and to foresee adequately the extent of human impact upon the natural environment and to assess the possibility of promoting alternative methods which do not threaten the ecological equilibrium. Research dedicated to the discovery and efficient use of alternative energies and to “clean” energy sources is of great importance. So is the restoration and protection of the already damaged countryside. These are only examples.

Perhaps the crucial factor in this predicament is the progressive establishment of a new global economic order. This would be founded on the mutual willingness and the conscience of the people in a common knowledge of the interdependence that binds together the natural environment and the future of humanity through what would be an authentically human form of development.

Conclusion

As we declared at the beginning, the purpose of this document is not to provide a global and comprehensive statement for the solution of the ecological problem. That is beyond our competence and, in any case, that is not our task. Nor did it seem useful to repeat here a detailed inventory of the degradations which the natural environment has suffered from human life as a consequence of many technologically caused abuses—or to cite the corresponding list of possible solutions, which we might anticipate from political authorities responsible for this region.

It has rather been our intention to draw attention to the many forms and the integrated character of the environmental problem, as well as to correct the sim-

plistic views which have wide circulation in society and among the faithful themselves.

It is necessary to emphasize the most fundamental perspectives of this critical reflection on the destiny of our civilization—which are ethical and religious perspectives. Only within the framework of such perspectives is it possible to articulate in appropriate terms the ecological question itself. Or, better still, the many questions implicit in the relationship between man and nature.

A suitable habitat for human life is certainly not the “virgin forest” nor is it any other ecosystem achieved solely through the forces of nature. The appropriate setting can only be a civilized habitation built through the work of man. The real challenge is not to preserve nature from the work of civilization, but to design civilization with an appropriate quality so that it verifies and maintains the balance of nature.

An essential factor which contributes to the appropriate quality to this work must be a knowledge both of the delicate and marvelous balances within the entire ecosystem, brought about by the forces of nature on our small planet, and of the responsible behavior which respect for this balance requires.

Even more fundamental, the appropriate quality of this work must stem from listening to the voice of the earth: for the earth has a voice. This voice speaks a language which re-echos the very Word of God.

The following passages from the Book of Wisdom are valuable for inspiring even today such a realization:

For creation in obedience to you its Maker, exerts itself to punish the wicked and sweetens itself for the benefit of those who trust in you.

Thus it becomes, by adapting itself to every situation, the agent of your all-nourishing bounty, conforming to the wish to those in need;

So that your beloved sons, O Lord, might understand that what nourishes man are not the various foods, but your Word which preserves all who trust in You.¹⁶

Notes

1. Cf. *The Future of All of Us. A Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, Milan, 1988, p. 421.
2. It seems useful to recall here that in scientific terms, the term “environment” may be considered the sum total of animate and inanimate factors, organized into systems of varying complexity, regulated by certain energy cycles, in which participate biological and chemical phenomena, linked to vegetable and animal life and geochemical phenomena, dependent on modifications which come about in the soil and the atmosphere and in surface waters. Within the environment are observed a series of balances which tend to maintain their composition as consistently as possible.

The term “nature” is used to indicate the natural environment, that is, that part of the environment not substantially modified by man (cf. Giovanni Battista Marini Bettolo, “Relations on the Theme of the Environment made to the Synod of Laymen,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, October 10, 1987, p. 3).

3. Psalm 8:6b-7b
4. Psalm 104:1b
5. Psalm 104:5
6. Isaiah 45:18
7. Psalm 104:24b
8. Genesis 3:17b
9. Psalm 8:7-9
10. Cf. Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3
11. Matthew 6:32
12. Genesis 1:26
13. Cf. Genesis 1:28
14. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, p. 34.
15. Giovanni Battista Marini Bettolo, *op. cit.*
16. Wisdom 16:24-26

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