

A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations

Message to the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment
June 1, 1972

ON THE OCCASION of the opening of the United Nations Conference on Environment, which you have prepared zealously and competently, we would like to tell you and all the participants of the interest with which we follow this great enterprise. The care of preserving and improving the natural environment, like the noble ambition of stimulating a first gesture of world cooperation in favor of this good necessary for everyone, meets needs that are deeply felt among the men of our times.

Today, indeed, there is a growing awareness that man and his environment are more inseparable than ever. The environment essentially conditions man's life and development, while man, in his turn, perfects and ennobles his environment through his presence, work, and contemplation. But human creativeness will yield true and lasting fruit only to the extent to which man respects the laws that govern the vital impulse and nature's capacity for regeneration. Both are united, therefore, and share a common temporal future. So man is warned of the necessity of replacing the advance, often blind and turbulent, of material progress left to its dynamism alone, with respect for the biosphere in an overall vision of his domain, which has become "one Earth", to quote the fine motto of the Conference.

The cancellation of distance by the progress of communication; the establishment of closer and closer bonds between the peoples through economic development; the growing subservience of the forces of nature to science and technology; the multiplication of human relations beyond the barriers of nationalities and races are so many factors of interdependence for better or for worse, for the hope of safety or the risk of disaster. An abuse, a deterioration in one part of the world has repercussions in other places and can spoil the quality of other people's lives, often unbeknown to themselves and through no fault of their own. Man now knows with absolute certainty that scientific and technical progress, despite its promising aspects for the advancement of all peoples, bears within it, like every human work, a heavy charge of ambivalence, for good and for evil.

In the first place intelligence can apply its discoveries as means of destruction, as in the case of atomic, chemical, and bacteriological arms and so many other

instruments of war, great and small, for which moral conscience can feel only horror. But how can we ignore the imbalances caused in the biosphere by the disorderly exploitation of the physical reserves of the planet, even for the purpose of producing something useful, such as the wasting of natural resources that cannot be renewed; pollution of the earth, water, the air and space, with the resulting attacks on vegetable and animal life? All that contributes to the impoverishment and deterioration of man's environment to the extent, it is said, of threatening his own survival. Finally, our generation must energetically accept the challenge of going beyond partial and immediate aims to prepare a hospitable earth for future generations.

Interdependency must now be met by joint responsibility; common destiny by solidarity. This will not be done by resorting to facile solutions. Just as the demographic problem is not solved by unduly limiting access to life, so the problem of the environment cannot be tackled with technical measures alone. The latter are indispensable, it is true, and your Assembly will have to study them and propose means to put the situation right. It is only too clear, for example, that industry being one of the main causes of pollution, it is absolutely necessary for those in charge of it to perfect their methods and find the means, as far as possible without harming production, to reduce, if not eliminate completely the causes of pollution. In this task of purification it is clear, too, that chemical research workers will play an important role, and that great hope is placed in their professional capacities.

But all technical measures would remain ineffectual if they were not accompanied by awareness of the necessity of a radical change of mentality. All are called to clear-sightedness and courage. Will our civilization, tempted to increase its marvelous achievements by despotic domination of the human environment, discover in time the way to control its material growth, to use the earth's food with wise moderation, and to cultivate real poverty of spirit in order to carry out urgent and indispensable reconversions? We would like to think so, for the very excesses of progress lead men, and, significantly, the young particularly, to recognize that their power over nature must be exercised in accordance with ethical demands. The saturation caused in some people by a life that is too easy and the growing awareness in a large number of the solidarity that links mankind, thus contribute to restoring the respectful attitude on which man's relationship with his environment is essentially based. How can we fail to recall here the imperishable example of St. Francis of Assisi and to mention the great Christian contemplative Orders, which offer the testimony of an inner harmony achieved in the framework of trusting communion with the rhythms and laws of nature?

"Everything created by God is good," the Apostle St. Paul writes (1 Tim 4:4), echoing the text of Genesis that relates God's satisfaction with each of his works. To rule creation means for the human race not to destroy it but to perfect it; to transform the world not into a chaos no longer fit for habitation, but into a beautiful abode where everything is respected. So no one can take possession in an absolute and selfish way of the environment, which is not a "*res nullius*" -- something not belonging to anyone -- but the "*res omnium*" -- the patrimony of mankind, so that those in possession of it -- men in private or public life -- must use it in a way that redounds to the real advantage of everyone. Man is certainly the first and truest treasure of the earth.

For this reason the care of offering everyone the possibility of access to a fair share in the resources, existing or potential, of our planet must weigh particularly on the conscience of men of goodwill. Development, that is, the complete growth of man, presents itself as *the* subject, the keystone of your deliberations, in which you will pursue not only ecological equilibrium but also a just equilibrium of prosperity between the centers of the industrialized world and their immense periphery. Want, it has rightly been said, is the worst of pollutions. Is it utopian to hope that the young nations, who are constructing, at the cost of great efforts, a better future for their peoples, seeking to assimilate the positive acquisitions of technical civilization, but rejecting its excesses and deviations, should become the pioneers in the building of a new world, for which the Stockholm Conference is called to give the starting signal? It would be all the more unfair to refuse them the means to do so, in that they have often had to pay a heavy, undeserved contribution to the degradation and impoverishment of the common biological patrimony. Thus, instead of seeing in the struggle for a better environment the reaction of fear of the rich, they would see in it, to the benefit of everyone, an affirmation of faith and hope in the destiny of the human family gathered round a common project.

It is with these sentiments that we pray to the Almighty to grant to all the participants, together with the abundance of his Blessings, the light of Wisdom and the spirit of brotherly Love for the complete success of their work.