

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 17 January 2001

God made man the steward of creation

1. In the hymn of praise proclaimed a few moments ago (*Ps* 148: 1-5), the Psalmist summons all creatures, calling them by name. Angels, sun, moon, stars and heavens appear on high; 22 things move upon the earth, as many as the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order to give an impression of fullness and totality. The believer, in a sense, is "the shepherd of being", that is, the one who leads all beings to God, inviting them to sing an "alleluia" of praise. The Psalm brings us into a sort of cosmic church, whose apse is the heavens and whose aisles are the regions of the world, in which the choir of God's creatures sings his praise.

On the one hand, this vision might represent a lost paradise and, on the other, the promised paradise. Not without reason, the horizon of a paradisaal universe, which Genesis (chap. 2) put at the very origins of the world, is placed by Isaiah (chap. 11) and the Book of Revelation (chap. 21-22) at the end of history. Thus we see that man's harmony with his fellow beings, with creation and with God is the plan followed by the Creator. This plan was and is continually upset by human sin, which is inspired by an alternative plan depicted in the same Book of Genesis (chap. 3-11), which describes man's progressive conflictual tension with God, with his fellow human beings and even with nature.

2. The contrast between the two plans emerges clearly in the vocation to which humanity is called, according to the Bible, and in the consequences resulting from its infidelity to this call. The human creature receives a mission to govern creation in order to make all its potential shine. It is a delegation granted at the very origins of creation, when man and woman, who are the "image of God" (*Gn* 1: 27), receive the order to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth (cf. *Gn* 1: 28). St Gregory of Nyssa, one of the three great Cappadocian Fathers, commented: "God made man capable of carrying out his role as king of the earth.... Man was created in the image of the One who governs the universe. Everything demonstrates that from the beginning his nature was marked by royalty.... He is the living image who participates by his dignity in the perfection of the divine archetype" (*De Hominis Opificio*, 4: PG 44, 136).

3. Man's lordship, however, is not "absolute, but ministerial: it is a real reflection of the unique and infinite lordship of God. Hence man must exercise it with wisdom and love, sharing in the boundless wisdom and love of God" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 52). In biblical language "naming" the creatures (cf. *Gn* 2: 19-20) is the sign of this mission of knowing

and transforming created reality. It is not the mission of an absolute and unquestionable master, but of a steward of God's kingdom who is called to continue the Creator's work, a work of life and peace. His task, described in the Book of Wisdom, is to rule "the world in holiness and righteousness" (*Wis* 9: 3).

Unfortunately, if we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, degrading that "flowerbed" - to use an image from Dante Alighieri (*Paradiso*, XXII, 151) - which is the earth, our dwelling-place.

4. We must therefore encourage and support the "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. "Another welcome sign is the growing attention being paid to the quality of life and to ecology, especially in more developed societies, where people's expectations are no longer concentrated so much on problems of survival as on the search for an overall improvement of living conditions" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 27). At stake, then, is not only a "physical" ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of the 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.

5. In this rediscovered harmony with nature and with one another, men and women are once again walking in the garden of creation, seeking to make the goods of the earth available to all and not just to a privileged few, as the biblical jubilee suggests (cf. *Lv* 25: 8-13, 23). Among those marvels we find the Creator's voice, transmitted by heaven and earth, by night and day: a language "with no speech nor words; whose voice is not heard" and which can cross all boundaries (cf. *Ps* 19 [18]: 2-5).

The Book of Wisdom, echoed by Paul, celebrates God's presence in the world, recalling that "from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator" (*Wis* 13: 5; cf. *Rom* 1: 20). This is also praised in the Jewish tradition of the Hasidim: "Where I wander - You! Where I ponder - You! ... In every trend, at every end, only You, You again, always You!" (M. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim* [Italian ed., Milan 1979, p. 256]).

The Holy Father spoke of his support for Jewish-Christian Friendship Day, a Church initiative in Italy, and invited his listeners to pray for Christian unity.

Today Jewish-Christian Friendship Day is being observed in Italy. In expressing my appreciation and support for this initiative of the Italian Church, I fervently hope that it will contribute to an authentic Jewish-Catholic dialogue.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will begin tomorrow, in which the Churches and Ecclesial Communities will pray together that Christ's will may be fulfilled, i.e., that his disciples may be one.

The theme chosen this year is one of Jesus' sayings recorded in the Gospel of John: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (*Jn* 14: 6). Dear brothers and sisters, I ask everyone to join in this united prayer to the Lord, and I make an appointment with you for Thursday, 25 January, at St Paul's Basilica, where, according to tradition, we will celebrate the solemn closing of this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

I extend a special welcome to the Lutheran ecumenical delegation and the *Schola Cantorum* from Helsinki. I warmly greet the various parish, college and school groups from Denmark, Australia and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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