

STEWARDS OF LIFE, STEWARDS OF NATURE



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OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES, THERE HAS BEEN A GROWING AWARENESS OF the need to protect and enhance the environment. But this increasing awareness is far from a comprehensive understanding. And despite new and urgent concerns about specific ecological problems (e.g., acid rain, deforestation, and global warming) most people tend to think of the environment as something "out there," something detached from their everyday lives and personal behavior patterns.

Earth Day 1990 attempted to foster public understanding of environmental problems and point to the progress, or lack thereof, in meeting such problems since Earth Day 1970. Some progress has been made. In 1969, the National Environmental Policy Act was adopted, giving us a national charter for the environment, and in 1975, the Environmental Protection Agency was established. Since the 1970s, legislation

has been adopted to protect our rivers and lakes, to control automobile emissions, and to prohibit certain types of noxious chemicals used in pesticides. There are now courses in ecology in our schools and colleges, and nationwide public advocacy organizations mobilize public sentiment and political support.

Ecology: An International Concern

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro focused international attention on environmental issues. The conference addressed a wide range of environmental issues, such as protection of the atmosphere, planning and management of land resources, deforestation, the impact of pollution on fragile ecosystems, desertification, biological diversity, and biotechnology. It also discussed protection of the oceans and seas, fishing rights, freshwater resources, and reserves. Further, it attempted to deal with problem areas such as sound management of toxic chemicals and hazardous wastes and sewage-related issues.

But overshadowing these weighty discussions was the inevitable tension between the developed nations of the world pushing for more control and legal restrictions to decrease pollution and safeguard natural resources, and the developing nations that do not possess and cannot presently afford the technology necessary to meet all the demands of the environmental advocates in the industrialized nations. Development was the central concern, and this escalated the economic disparities between nations and peoples and the continued presence of hunger, disease, and poverty. The conference also pointed to the patterns of production, consumption, and waste that prevail in the developed nations and the dependence of developing nations, not always acknowledged, on new patterns of international assistance and cooperation. Thus, despite the agreements and forward-looking strategies of the Rio conference, there remains the difficulty of establishing international agreements and policies to which we all subscribe.

In *Making Peace with the Planet*, Barry Commoner describes the situation in terms of a war between the ecosphere and the technosphere. Tragedies like Bhopal, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and the Alaskan oil spill remind us of the damage done to the ecosphere when we ignore or fail to control properly the technosphere. Commoner maintains that peace can be achieved only through understanding and negotiation, not by a proliferation of battles or small wars.

Environmental degradation is often claimed to be a natural consequence of population growth. It is important to realize that the greatest abuse of the environment takes place in the least populated industrialized nations of the world. It is not the number of people, but the processes of industrial production that create the greatest problem. As Commoner observes:

In sum, the data from an industrial country like the U.S. and from developing countries show that the largest influence on pollution levels is the pollution-generating tendency of the system of industrial and agricultural production, and the transportation and power systems. In all countries, the environmental impact of the technology factor is significantly greater than the influence of population size or affluence.

In surveying the recent literature on ecology and the environment, one notes a growing recognition that protecting and properly using the goods of creation is fundamentally a moral issue.

The goods of the earth are part of the heritage of the entire human family. They are held in common across national boundaries and continental divides. They belong to the poor and developing nations as well as to the rich and successful. Indeed, many of the untapped resources of the world—very likely beyond our present estimation—are in Africa and South America. Add to this the resources in our oceans and the undiscovered treasures of outer space. A collective sense of stewardship and worldwide recognition of common needs and the common good—including proper use of all resources now and in the future—will enable us to exercise proper self-restraint in the use of natural resources.

Integrity of Creation

In his 1990 World Day of Peace message, *Peace with God the Creator; Peace with All Creation*, Pope John Paul II addressed the ecological question. The Holy Father placed this discussion in the context of humanity's quest for peace—peace among nations, peace among peoples, peace within nations and families. True solutions to environmental problems, he said, will be based on a morally coherent world view.

The Holy Father begins with the account of creation in the Book of Genesis, noting that the creation events are always followed by the refrain "And God saw that it was good." When human beings reject the Creator's plan, or recklessly ignore it, they provoke "a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order." This leads us, says the Holy Father, to look at the ecological crisis as a moral issue.

Two fundamental principles should guide our moral consideration: *the integrity of all creation and respect for life.*

Pope John Paul II's description of environmental problems is similar to those described by Barry Commoner and others. Ozone depletion, "greenhouse effect," the unregulated dumping of industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels, the unrestricted sacking of the forests—all of which damage the atmosphere and the environment.

But environmental problems are not only these massive problems over which the ordinary person has little or no control. Ride along our city streets and country roads and see the old tires and abandoned cars, the empty cans, the paper and plastic refuse from “fast-food” stores, the abuse of trees and shrubs, and the omnipresent broken glass on sidewalks and streets. All of these are part of the assault on the environment, and they result from personal carelessness, negligence, and arrogant wastefulness. With minimum attention and effort, they can be corrected and our daily environment vastly improved.

The Dignity of the Human Person

The second principle the Holy Father points to is respect for life and for the dignity of the human person. Too often, increased productivity overshadows a concern for the worker's safety or long-range well-being. And in the United States, a libertarian approach to the use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco endangers health. Add to this the consumerist mentality and the emphasis on personal comfort and convenience, and we see an erosion of respect for life, health, and well-being. The Holy Father also notes the disruption of ecological balances by the uncontrolled destruction of plant and animal life. Much of this results from the dumping of industrial wastes into our local streams and rivers and from a reckless use of aerosol products.

John Paul II also warns against indiscriminate biological and genetic research and experimentation. This is already underway in plants and animals, and we are constantly faced with proposals for genetic experimentation on humans. The whole debate about government funding of fetal research is a signal of real danger.

In search of a solution, the Holy Father points to a harmonious universe or “cosmos” endowed by God with its own integrity, its own internal dynamic balance. This order must be respected and protected. The earth and its natural resources are “a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all.”

The New Solidarity

Protection of this common heritage demands a more internationally coordinated approach to the management of the earth's goods, not only to serve the wealthy, industrialized nations of the world but to meet the needs and legitimate aspirations of the people of the developing nations. In United Nations debates, Third World representatives are often suspicious of environmental strategies that may have the tragic effect of retarding or nullifying the development process. A truly responsible global worldview must meet the problems of the developing nations.

The urgent moral need for a new solidarity is a first step toward global cooperation, says John Paul II. This need presents new opportunities for strengthening coop-

erative and peaceful relations among states. But it must also include a worldwide effort to address the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world, especially in the poorer nations. Many ecologists remind us that the greatest threat to the environment comes from the life-styles of the wealthy and affluent who consume far more per capita than do the populations of the developing nations.

Pope John Paul II also warns of the threat posed to the environment by modern war and the arms race. Granted that the present world situation is promising for peace, there are still local and regional conflicts that damage land, rob the workforce of farmers, and often destroy the systems that protect the environment. Witness conditions in Bosnia, Somalia, Burundi, and Bangladesh.

The principles enunciated in the 1990 World Day of Peace Message were restated and applied in the interventions of the Holy See's Delegation to the Rio Conference. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Vatican Secretary of State, emphasized again the need and duty for international solidarity. While recognizing some of the failures or omissions to take proper action on the part of developing nations, he also noted a growing isolation on the part of developed nations and a tendency to ignore, often for selfish reasons, their duty and responsibility to assist the developing nations and to spearhead new strategies to alleviate global suffering and human misery. Cardinal Sodano urged that "humanity discover its common roots and that our awareness of being brothers and sisters give rise to a great creative effort aimed at the effective exercise of solidarity." Cardinal Sodano also called upon the developed nations to address the structural forms of poverty, "by ensuring employment, education and primary health care for parents and children, with special attention for overcoming infant mortality."

Population growth has frequently been pinpointed as a major cause of pollution and resource depletion. The Holy See has consistently argued that population growth, of and by itself, is not the primary cause of environmental degradation, and even as a contributing cause, it must be seen in a larger context. In addressing population issues, respect for the dignity of the person, recognition of the family as the basic social unit, and protection of the inherent right of parents to decide freely and responsibly on the number of children and the spacing of births are the guiding principles. Alleviation of poverty and disease, improvement of living conditions and wider educational opportunities, as well as recognition of women's rights and potentialities, contribute to responsible decision making regarding childbearing and parenting.

Stewardship: An Action Plan

The Holy Father calls on modern society to take a serious look at its lifestyle—particularly the demand for instant gratification and unlimited consumption. He also calls for education in ecological responsibility—responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth.

In this regard, there are simple things we can all do to lessen environmental damage. We can trim our consumption patterns, especially in terms of convenience goods. We can conserve water and energy. We can cooperate with local recycling programs by tying up old newspapers and by separating glass and cans from other trash. In sum, we can make some small personal sacrifices that cost little more than convenience and comfort, and thereby safeguard and enhance the treasures of God's creation.

Pope John Paul II concludes his message by repeating that care of the environment is the responsibility of everyone. Similarly, Barry Commoner concludes that making peace with the planet demands an appreciation of our common concerns and responsibilities. The U.S. bishops, in *Economic Justice for All*, noted that

No one can ever own capital resources absolutely or control their own without regard for others and society as a whole. . . . Short-term profits reaped at the cost of depletion of natural resources or the pollution of the environment violates this trust.

The basic message is that protecting the environment protects the common good of humanity—now and for untold centuries to come. And the common good supersedes individual comfort and convenience, for when the common good is ignored or denied, the good of the individual is likewise endangered.

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good” (Gn 1:31). God entrusted all creation to the man and woman. We inherit the goods of creation and the responsibility of stewardship. We must pass on all that is good to generations yet to come.