

What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?

by the

Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is now at a critical point in its history. For the past number of years we have experienced political instability, economic decline and growth in armed conflict. Almost every day the media highlight one or other of these problems. The banner headlines absorb our attention so much so that we tend to overlook a more deep-seated crisis which, we believe, lies at the root of many of our economic and political problems. To put it simply; our country is in peril. All the living systems on land and in the seas around us are being ruthlessly exploited. The damage to date is extensive and, sad to say, it is often irreversible.

One does not need to be an expert to see what is happening and to be profoundly troubled by it. Within a few short years, brown eroded hills have replaced luxuriant forests in many parts of the country. We see dried up riverbeds where, not so long ago, streams flowed throughout the year. Farmers tell us that, because of erosion and chemical poisoning, the yield from the croplands has fallen substantially. Fishermen and experts on marine life have a similar message. Their fish catches are shrinking in the wake of the extensive destruction of coral reefs and mangrove forests. The picture which is emerging in every province of the country is clear and bleak. The attack on the natural world which benefits very few Filipinos is rapidly whittling away at the very base of our living world and endangering its fruitfulness for future generations.

As we reflect on what is happening in the light of the Gospel we are convinced that this assault on creation is sinful and contrary to the teachings of our faith. The Bible tells us that God created this world, (Gen 1:1); that he loves His world and is pleased with it (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31); and that He created man and woman in His image and charged them to be stewards of His creation (Gen 1:27-28). God, who created our world, loves life and wishes to share this life with every creature. St. John tells us that Jesus saw His mission in this light: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10).

We are not alone in our concern. Tribal people all over the Philippines, who have seen the destruction of their world at close range, have cried out in anguish. Also men and women who attempt to live harmoniously with nature and those who study ecology have tried to alert people to the magnitude of the destruction taking place in our time. The latter are in a good position to tell us what is happening since they study the web of dynamic relationships which support and sustains all life within the earthly household. This includes human life.

A CALL TO RESPECT AND DEFEND LIFE

At this point in the history of our country it is crucial that people motivated by religious faith develop a deep appreciation for the fragility of our islands' life-systems and take steps to defend the Earth. It is a matter of life and death. We are aware of this threat to life when it comes to nuclear weapons. We know that a nuclear war would turn the whole earth into a fireball and render the planet inhospitable to life. We tend to forget that the constant, cumulative destruction of life-forms and different habitats will, in the long term, have the same effect. Faced with these challenges, where the future of life is at stake, Christian men and women are called to take a stand on the side of life.

We, the Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, ask Christians and all people of goodwill in the country to reflect with us on the beauty of the Philippines land and seas which nourish and sustain our lives. As we thank God for the many ways He has gifted our land we must also resolve to cherish and protect what remains of this bounty for this and future generations of Filipinos. We are well aware that, for the vast majority of Filipinos, the scars on nature, which increasingly we see all around us, mean less nutritious food, poorer health and an uncertain future. This will inevitably lead to an increase in political and social unrest.

WE SEE THE BEAUTY AND THE PAIN OF THE EARTH

As you read this letter or listen to sections of it being read, scenes from your barrio may come to mind. In your mind's eye you may see well laid out rice paddies flanked by coconuts with their fronds swaying in the breeze. Or you may hear the rustle of the *cogon* grass on the hills behind your barrio. These scenes mean so much to us and are beautiful. Yet they do not represent the original vegetation with which God has blessed our land. They show the heavy hand of human labor, planning and sometimes short-sightedness.

For generations the hunting and food gathering techniques of our tribal forefathers showed a sensitivity and respect for the rhythms of nature. But all of this has changed in recent years. Huge plantations and mono-crop agriculture have pitted humans against nature. There are short-term profits for the few and ever substantial harvests, but the fertility of the land has suffered and the diversity of the natural world has been depleted. So our meditation must begin by reflecting on the original beauty of our land, rivers and seas. This wonderful community of the living existed for millions of years before human beings came to these shores.

THE FORESTS

When our early ancestors arrived here they found a country covered by a blanket of trees. These abounded with over 7,500 species of flowering plants, not to mention animals, birds and insects. These were watered by the tropical rains which swept in from the seas and gradually seeped down through the vegetation and soil to form clear flowing rivers and sparkling lakes which abounded in fish and aquatic life before completing the cycle and returning to the sea. An incredible variety of insects lived in the forest and were busy with all kinds of tasks from recycling dead wood to pollinating flowering plants. The community of the living was not confined to creatures who walked on the Earth. Birds flew through the air, their bright plumes

and varying calls adding color and song to the green of the forests. Birds are also the great sowers. They contributed greatly to the variety of plant life which is spread throughout the forest. Finally, small and large animals lived in the forest and feasted on its largesse. Our land born out of volcanic violence and earthquake brought forth a bounty of riches. We stand in awe at the wisdom of our Creator who has fashioned this world of life, color, mutual support and fruitfulness in our land.

OUR SEAS

The beauty did not end at the shoreline. Our islands were surrounded by blue seas, fertile mangroves and enchanting coral reefs. The coral reefs were a world of color and beauty with fish of every shape and hue darting in and out around the delicate coral reefs. *Perlas ng Silangan* (Pearls of the Orient) was an appropriate name for this chain of wooded islands, surrounded by clear seas and studded with coral reefs.

CREATION IS A LONG PROCESS

You might ask: Why is it important to remember the original state of our land? First of all, it reminds us of how God, in His wisdom and goodness, shaped this land in this part of the world. It did not happen overnight. It took millions of years of care and love to mold and reshape this land with all its beauty, richness and splendor, where intricate pathways bind all the creatures together in a mutually supportive community. Human beings are not alien to this community. God intended this land for us, his special creatures, but not so that we might destroy it and turn it into a wasteland. Rather, He charged us to be stewards of his creation, to care for it, to protect its fruitfulness and not to allow it to be devastated (Gen 1:28). By protecting what is left of the rainforest we insure that the farmers have rain and plants for the food that sustains us.

OUR FORESTS LAID WASTE

How much of this richness and beauty is left a few thousand years after human beings arrived at these shores? Look around and see where our forests have gone. Out of the original 30 million hectares there is now only 1 million hectares of primary forest left. Where are some of the most beautiful creatures who used to dwell in our forests? These are God's masterpieces, through which he displays his power, ingenuity and love for his creation. Humans have forgotten to live peacefully with other creatures. They have destroyed their habitat and hunted them relentlessly. Even now many species are already extinct and destruction of species is expected to increase dramatically during the next decade as the few remaining strands of forest are wiped out by loggers and *kaingineros* (slash and burn farmers). What about the birds? They used to greet us each morning and lift our spirits beyond the horizons of this world. Now they are silenced. In many places all we hear now are cocks crowing. Where is the soaring eagle circling above the land or the colorful *kalaw* (hornbill)?

THE HEMORRHAGE OF OUR LIFE BLOOD

After a single night's rain, look at the chocolate brown rivers in your locality and remember that they are carrying the life blood of the land into the sea. The soil, instead of being the seed bed of life, becomes a cloak of death, smothering, retarding and killing coral polyps. Soil specialists tell us that we lose the equivalent of 100,000 hectares of soil one meter thick each year. We are hardly aware of this enormous loss which is progressively eroding away our most fertile soil and thus our ability to produce food for an expanding population. Any comprehensive land reform must address this most serious threat to our food supply.

DESERTS IN THE SEA

How can fish swim in running sewers like the Pasig and so many more rivers which we have polluted? Who has turned the wonderworld of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life? Imagine, only 5% of our corals are in their pristine state! The blast of dynamite can still be heard on our coastal waters. We still allow muro-ami fishing methods which take a terrible toll both on the young swimmers and the corals. Mine tailings are dumped into fertile seas like Calancan Bay in Santa Cruz, Marinduque where they destroy forever the habitat of the fish. Chemicals are poisoning our lands and rivers. They kill vital organisms and in time they will poison us. The ghost of the dreaded Minamata disease hangs over towns in the Agusan River basin and the Davao Gulf.

RECENT DESTRUCTION CARRIED OUT IN THE NAME OF PROGRESS

Most of this destruction has taken place since the beginning of this century, a mere wink of an eye in the long history of our country. Yet in that same time we have laid waste to complex living systems that have taken millions of years to reach their present state of development.

We often use the word progress to describe what has taken place over the past few decades. There is no denying in some areas our roads have improved and that electricity is more readily available. But can we say that there is real progress? Who has benefited most and who has borne the real costs? The poor are as disadvantaged as ever and the natural world has been grievously wounded. We have stripped it bare, silenced its sounds and banished other creatures, from the community of the living. Through our thoughtlessness and greed we have sinned against God and His Creation.

One thing is certain: we cannot continue to ignore and disregard the Earth. Already we are experiencing the consequence of our shortsightedness and folly. Even though we squeeze our lands and try to extract more from them, they produce less food. The air in our cities is heavy with noxious fumes. Instead of bringing energy and life it causes bronchial illness. Our forests are almost gone, our rivers are almost empty, our springs and wells no longer sparkle with the living water. During the monsoon rain, flash-floods sweep through our towns and

cities and destroy everything in their path. Our lakes and estuaries are silting up. An out-of-sight out-of-mind mentality allows us to flush toxic waste and mine tailings into our rivers and seas in the mistaken belief that they can no longer harm us. Because the living world is interconnected, the poison is absorbed by marine organisms. We in turn are gradually being poisoned when we eat seafood.

WE CAN AND MUST DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT

It is already late in the day and so much damage has been done. No one can pinpoint the precise moment when the damage has become so irreversible that our living world will collapse. But we are rapidly heading in that direction. Even now there are signs of stress in every corner of our land. As we look at what is happening before our eyes, and think of the horrendous consequences for the land and the people, we would do well to remember that God, who created this beautiful land, will hold us responsible for plundering it and leaving it desolate. So will future generations of Filipinos. Instead of gifting them with a fruitful land, all we will leave behind is a barren desert. We, the Bishops, call on all Filipinos to recognize the urgency of this task and to respond to it now.

As Filipinos we can and must act now. Nobody else will do it for us. This is our home: we must care for it, watch over it, protect it and love it. We must be particularly careful to protect what remains of our forests, rivers, and corals and to heal, wherever we can, the damage which has already been done.

The task of preserving and healing is a daunting one given human greed and the relentless drive of our plunder economy. But we must not lose hope. God has gifted us with creativity and ingenuity. He has planted it in our songs and poetry. We can harness our creativity in the service of life and shun anything that leads to death.

SIGNS OF HOPE

Despite the pain and despoliation which we now have mentioned, there are signs of hope. Our forefathers and tribal brothers and sisters today still attempt to live in harmony with nature. They see the Divine Spirit in the living world and show their respect through prayers and offerings. Tribal Filipinos remind us that the exploitative approach to the natural world is foreign to our Filipino culture.

The vitality of our Filipino family is also a sign of hope. Parents share their life with their children. They protect them and care for them and are particularly solicitous when any member of the family is sick. This is especially true of mothers; they are the heartbeat of the family, working quietly in the home to create an atmosphere where everyone is accepted and loved. No sacrifice is too demanding when it comes to caring for a sick member of the family. The values we see in our families of patient toil, concern for all and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of others are the very values which we must now transfer to the wider sphere in our efforts to conserve heal and love our land. It is not a mere coincidence that women have been at the

forefront of the ecological movement in many countries. The tree planting program of the Chipko in India, popularly known as the "hug a tree" movement and the Greenbelt movement in Kenya spring to mind.

We call to mind that, despite the devastation which has taken place in our forests and seas, we Filipinos are sensitive to beauty. Even in the poorest home, parents and children care for flowers. We are also encouraged by the growth in environmental awareness among many Filipinos. Small efforts in tree farming and planting can blossom into a major movement of genuine care for the Earth. We are happy that there have been some successes. Both the Chico dam project and the Bataan nuclear plant were suspended after massive local resistance. This year, the people of San Fernando, Bukidnon and Madsalip, Zamboanga del Sur defended what remains of their forest with their own bodies. At the Santa Cruz Mission in South Cotabato, serious efforts are underway to reforest bald hills and develop ecologically sound ways of farming. The diocese of Pagadian has chosen the Eucharist and ecology as its pastoral focus for this year. These are all signs for us that the Spirit of God, who breathed over the waters, and originally brought life out of chaos is now prompting men and women both inside and outside the church to dedicate their lives to enhancing and protecting the integrity of Creation. In order that these drops and rivulets will join together and form a mighty stream in the defense of life, we need a sustaining vision to guide us.

OUR VISION

We will not be successful in our efforts to develop a new attitude towards the natural world unless we are sustained and nourished by a new vision. This vision must blossom forth from our understanding of the world as God intends it to be. We can know the shape of this world by looking at how God originally fashioned our world and laid it out before us.

This vision is also grounded in our Faith. The Bible tells us that God created this beautiful and fruitful world for all His creatures to live in (Gen 1:1-2:4) and that He has given us the task of being stewards of HIS CREATION (Gen 2:19-20).

The relationship which links God, human beings and all the community of the living together is emphasized in the covenant which God made with Noah after the flood. The rainbow which we still see in the sky is a constant reminder of this bond and challenge (Gen 9:19). This covenant recognizes the very close bonds which bind living forms together in what are called ecosystems. The implications of this covenant for us today are clear. As people of the covenant, we are called to protect endangered ecosystems, like our forests, mangroves and coral reefs and to establish just human communities in our land. More and more we must recognize that the commitment to work for justice and to preserve the integrity of creation are two inseparable dimensions of our Christian vocation to work for the coming of the kingdom of God in our times.

CHRIST OUR LIFE (Col 3:4)

As Christians, we also draw our vision from Christ. We have much to learn from the attitude of respect which Jesus displayed towards the natural world. He was very much aware that all the creatures in God's creation are related. Jesus lived lightly on the earth and warned his disciples against hoarding material possessions and allowing their hearts to be enticed by the lure of wealth and power (Matt 6:19-21; Lk 9:1-6). But our meditation on Jesus goes beyond this. Our faith tells us that Christ is the centerpoint of human history and creation. All the rich unfolding of the universe and emergences and flowering of life on Earth are centered on Him (Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:16-17). The destruction of any part of creation, especially, the extinction of species defaces the image of Christ which is etched in creation.

MARY, MOTHER OF LIFE

We Filipino have a deep devotion to Mary. We turn to her for help and protection in time of need. We know that she is on the side of the poor and those who are rejected (Lk 1:52). Our new sensitivity to what is happening to our land also tells us that she is on the side of life. As a mother she is pained and saddened when she sees people destroy the integrity of creation through soil erosion, blast-fishing or poisoning land. Many know what the consequences of this destruction are. Therefore, as Mother of Life, she challenges us to abandon the pathway of death and return to the way of life.

Taken together, the various strands of our Christian vision envisages a profound renewal which must effect our people, our culture and our land. It challenges us to live once again in harmony with God's creation. This vision of caring for the Earth and living in harmony with it can guide us as, together, we use our ingenuity and many gifts to heal our wounded country.

THIS IS WHAT WE SUGGEST

In the light of this vision we recommend action in the following areas:

1. What each individual can do

Be aware of what is happening in your area. Do not remain silent when you see your environment being destroyed. Use your influence within your family and community to develop this awareness. Avoid a fatalistic attitude. We are people of hope who believe that together we can change the course of events. Organize people around local ecological issues. Become involved in some concrete action. There is much that can be done by individuals to reforest bald hills and prevent soil erosion.

2. What the Churches can do

Like every other group, the Church as a community is called to conversion around this, the ultimate pro-life issue. Until very recently many religions, including the Catholic Church, have been slow to respond to the

ecological crisis. We, the bishops, would like to redress this neglect. There is a great need for a Filipino theology of creation which will be sensitive to our unique living world, our diverse culture and our religious heritage. The fruits of this reflection must be made widely available through our preaching and catechetical programs. Our different liturgies must deliberate the beauty and pain of our world, our connectedness to the natural world and the on-going struggle for social justice. We would like to encourage the administrators of our catholic schools to give special importance to the theme of peace, justice and the integrity of creation in their schools.

Since programs, however laudable, will not implement themselves, we suggest the setting up a Care of the Earth ministry at every level of Church organization, from the basic Christian communities, through the parish structure and diocesan offices right up to the national level. This ministry could help our new and wider vision. The idea is not so much to add another activity to our personal ministry, but rather that this concern should underpin everything we do.

3. What the Government can do

We ask the government not to pursue short-term economic gains at the expense of long-term ecological damage. We suggest that the government groups together into an independent Department all the agencies which deal at present with ecological issues. This Department should promote an awareness of the fragility and limited carrying capacity of our islands' ecosystems and advocate measures designed to support ecologically sustainable development. Obviously the Department should have an important contribution to make to related Departments like, Education (DECS), Health, Natural Resources (DENR) and Agriculture. There is also a need to encourage research into the ecosystems of our land and the problems they face in the future. The Department should publish a state of the environment report for each region and for the country as a whole each year. Above all, the Department needs legislative teeth to insure that its policies and programs are implemented.

4. Non-governmental organizations have a very important role to play in developing a widespread ecological awareness among people. They can also act as a watch-dog to ensure that the government and those in public offices do not renege on their commitment to place this concern at the top of their list.

CONCLUSION

This brief statement about our living world and the deterioration we see all around us attempts to reflect the cry of our people and the cry of our land. At the root of the problem we see an exploitative mentality, which is at variance with the Gospel of Jesus. This expresses itself in acts of violence against fellow Filipinos. But it is not confined to the human sphere. It also infects and poisons our relationship with our land and seas.

We reap what we sow; the results of our attitude and activities are predictable and deadly. Our small farmers tells us that their fields are less productive and are becoming sterile. Our fishermen are finding it increasingly difficult to catch fish. Our lands, forests and rivers cry out that they are being eroded, denuded and polluted. As bishops, we have tried to listen and respond to their cry. There is an urgency about this issue which calls for widespread education and immediate action. We are convinced that the challenge which we have tried to highlight here is similar to the one which Moses put before the people of Israel before they entered their promised land:

"Today I offer you a choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life and then you and your descendants will live." (Dt 30:19-20)

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