

Our Relationship with the Environment:

The Need for Conversion

Commission for Social Affairs
Canadian Conference
of Catholic Bishops

In October 2003, our Commission for Social Affairs released a letter on the Christian ecological imperative entitled “You love all that exists... all things are Yours, God, lover of life” (Wisdom 11.26). Since then, the United Nations has declared 2008 as the *International Year of Planet Earth*. We wish to take this opportunity to continue our reflections with our nation’s Catholics.

The **Synthesis Report** of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) clearly demonstrates the magnitude of the challenges to be addressed.¹ Scientific and technical developments can help, but we will not succeed without a personal and collective conversion. It is in this spirit that we propose this reflection which is intended to inspire us.

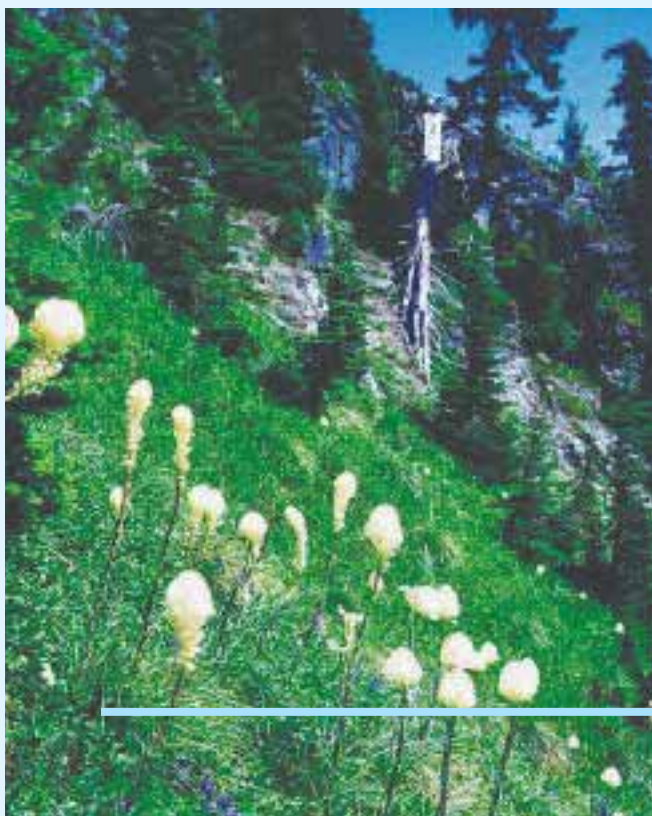
Biblical Vision of Creation and Humanity

To appreciate the extent of this conversion, let us recall God’s plan for nature and humanity. God the Creator brought creation out of chaos into cosmos, that is, from a universe marked by disorder to one where order and beauty reign. Proud of this, God says: “This is good” (Genesis 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). We are filled with this same feeling when we view photographs of our planet taken by astronauts. We see it as a small, bluish ball surrounded by a fragile layer of water and cloudy air... one could say like a precious jewel.



On this miniscule planet, a human being is created in the image and likeness of God: capable, like God, of knowing, loving and acting freely and responsibly. “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden, to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2.15). To till is to develop and stimulate growth; to keep and to care for means to ensure the durability of resources. The notion of “sustainable development” is thus prescribed in the very first pages of Genesis. The earth is entrusted to humanity like a garden that is managed but not owned. Humans are responsible for being gardeners for the species of plants and good shepherds for the species of animals. Humanity is accountable, not only for managing the domain entrusted to it, but also for the image of God humans reflect by means of their management.

The term “environment” suggests there is a centre, which is the human being. However, humanity is part of the physical and ecological balance and also part of the very complex network of relationships that characterizes the environment. Intervening in one or other relationship modifies the balance of others. As Archbishop Renato Martino has said, “Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a ‘cosmos’ endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected.”²



Rupture of Harmony with Nature

While scientific and technological developments have brought us indisputable benefits, they have also had devastating effects on nature including air, water and soil pollution, increased greenhouse gases, destruction of the ozone layer, deterioration of large ecosystems, disappearance of a number of species and reduced biodiversity. The IPCC, which received the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, affirms that all nations will be affected by the increase in greenhouse gases. Its experts foresee a multiplication of heat waves, droughts and floods. Accelerated melting of ice at the poles will significantly increase ocean levels and have devastating effects, especially in the southern hemisphere, home to the world’s poorest nations.

After signing the Kyoto Protocol, in which we agreed to decrease our greenhouse gases to six per cent less than those of 1990, we have instead increased them by approximately 25 per cent. The latest UN report on human development describes Canada as an “extreme case” of a nation that is disregarding its commitments.³

The current ecological problems are essentially witnesses for the prosecution, testifying that we have violated the laws of life. We have forgotten that “we command nature only by obeying her.” It appears to be more difficult to respect the laws of nature than to transport humans to the moon and back! The verdict is simple: we have mismanaged the “domain” entrusted to us.

Rupture of Harmony with Our Fellow Creatures

This rupture of harmony with nature brings consequences no less dramatic for those who share our common humanity. The Second Vatican Council affirmed: “God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples”

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(*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 69). Commenting on this statement, Pope John Paul II has said:

It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the massive threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness – both individual and collective – are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence.⁴

Instead of fostering this interdependence, we have allowed the planet to fragment into the Third World and the Fourth World, as if it rotated at different speeds. The IPCC experts tell us the poorest countries will be those most severely affected by climate change.

There is also injustice with regards to future generations. Our current leaders wish to avoid bequeathing a crushing burden of debt to our descendants. After spending beyond our means, it would be unreasonable of us to expect them to pay the price. But a damaged

environment represents a debt incomparably greater and more difficult to reduce. The economic costs required to restore the environment are unfathomable. We have only to think of the costs relating to smog days, health problems and climate disturbances.

An article in the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* states that every society has a duty to seek the child's best interests. How can we take pride in leaving our children the heritage of such a damaged environment? It was in much better condition when we received it!

Steps Are Underway

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that environmental issues are more and more part of the agenda of governments, municipalities, industries, businesses and media. More rational methods are being used to manage ocean, forest and earth resources. Industries are reducing their pollution emissions; municipalities are installing costly sewage treatment facilities. The percentage of waste recovery and recycling is gradually increasing. Growing numbers of individuals are agreeing to make personal efforts in favour of the environment, which include reducing highway speed limits, using public transit, decreasing and recycling waste, purchasing local and regional products, and lowering residential temperatures. Ecological awareness is emerging and becoming a fact of culture.

In addition, ten years after the signing of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1997), scientists are observing with satisfaction that the emission of substances depleting the ozone layer has, for all practical purposes, been eliminated. A number of large cities, concerned with reducing the frequency of smog and ensuring air quality, are fulfilling the Kyoto objectives. The same holds true for several political jurisdictions in the United States and the European Union.

All these steps are important. But, scientists tell us, we are heading toward a concrete wall, and the steps we are currently taking will only serve to diminish the force of the impact. Our leaders have made commitments in Rio (1992), Kyoto (1997), Johannesburg

(2002), and more recently in Bali (2007). But they have great difficulty in moving from words to action. When our security is threatened, they find ways to protect it, yet it is compromised even more at present by the effects of environmental deterioration.

Pope John Paul II reminded us that the crisis is not only ecological, but moral and spiritual. A moral crisis must be met with conversion, which is a change in perspective, attitudes and behaviour. Essentially, this conversion is aimed at the ruptures we have created with nature, with our neighbour and with God. It has to focus on re-establishing a relationship, that is, creating a climate of reconciliation.

Re-establishing Links with Nature

We must re-establish the links with nature that we have damaged. We now know that we are tied much more closely to the environment in which we live than we had imagined. Our planet is a spacecraft on which we navigate together with the environment, for better and for worse. As Saint Paul says, “the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now,” in the hope “to be set free from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8.22 and 21). Is development that is more respectful of nature’s laws and rhythms not a first step toward its freedom?

In this respect, each of us is responsible for having an appropriate attitude toward the environment. We may believe that the actions of individuals, groups and communities are but drops of water in the ocean in comparison with the global challenges we are facing, but the cumulative effect of simple gestures carries weight. We have only to remember Jean Giono’s beautiful fable-like story, *The Man Who Planted Trees*, so brilliantly filmed by Frédéric Bach. As an example, many of us could probably decrease by a ton the greenhouse gases we produce annually.⁵

To convert is also to regain a sense of limit. It means adjusting our lifestyle to available planetary resources. Many are not renewable, and those that are have a pace of regeneration too slow for our impatient natures.

A limited planet cannot meet unlimited needs, especially when its great ecosystems are undergoing premature aging.

Since overconsumption and waste have become a way of life, conversion implies that we free ourselves collectively from our obsession to possess and consume. In the words of renowned ecologist Pierre Dansereau, “joyful austerity” or voluntary simplicity will help us to reorient ourselves on being, instead of having. Our humanity will gain in the process.



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It will then be easier for us to look at nature with new eyes. Instead of considering it primarily as a resource to be exploited, we will be more inclined to admire its beauty and grandeur. In its own way, nature will open us to the mystery of Life and its Creator. As Saint John of the Cross says, “...through these woods he pass’d...clothing every place with loveliest reflection of his face.” An attitude of contemplation contributes greatly to renewing ties and establishing a new alliance with our environment.

Renewing Ties with Our Brothers and Sisters

The issue of the environment, now so crucial, ties us to one another as never before. Selfishness is no longer merely immoral, it is becoming suicidal. We no longer have a choice about new solidarity and new forms of sharing.

The Johannesburg Conference in 2002 clearly showed that it is impossible to protect the environment if entire areas of continents continue to live in misery. Many of our brothers and sisters are forced into a way of life that is unacceptable and unworthy of their human condition. We are more aware of this than ever, but we behave as if we were blind, deaf and insensible.

In the past, our country made a commitment to donate 0.7 per cent of our Gross National Product (GNP) in the form of international aid. It is currently giving less than 0.3 per cent: crumbs falling from the rich man's table, while Lazarus is dying of hunger



We hope our elected representatives will remember first of all the heritage we are leaving our children when making important decisions. Because we love our children, what environment, what society do we wish to bequeath to them?

(Luke 16.19-30). The Gospel message reminds us, however, that the path to meeting God passes along the path of our brothers and sisters.

We must also establish ties, in advance, with future generations. We are reminded of the Gospel episode in which the Apostles argued among themselves about who would be the greatest. Jesus took a child and placed it in their midst. He invited his disciples to see reality through a child's eyes. Parents and grandparents experience this conversion of perspective which brings them back to what is essential. We hope our elected representatives will remember first of all the heritage we are leaving our children when making important decisions. Because we love our children, what environment, what society do we wish to bequeath to them? A Spanish poet wrote, "It is beautiful to love the world through the eyes of those that are yet to be born" (Castillo).

Renewing Our Ties with God

Are we not like the prodigal son who asked his father for his inheritance and then left home and proceeded to waste it (Luke 15.11-32)? In our drive to earn more, to possess more, to consume always more, we have sacrificed a great deal to the economic almighty, which has become like the substance of modern life. We have mismanaged the Garden of Eden entrusted to us. It has lost part of its integrity and beauty.

Moreover, although we have the knowledge and means of sharing the goods of the earth to which all are entitled, like spoiled children we prefer to ensure our own comfort and lifestyle. We have yielded to the innate selfishness that marks each of us like a scar. Even today, God is asking us, "Where is your brother" (Genesis 4.9)?

Similarly, we have tarnished the image of God that is within us. In receiving his original blessing, humanity was invited to be the bearer of the image of the God who is a friend of life, concerned with the truth and beauty of life, filled with love and compassion for all, in particular for the poor and those who suffer. Are we truly this image of God?

Some of our choices stem from our individual behaviour, others from what Pope John Paul II called “structures of sin” – in which we participate in a more or less responsible manner.⁶ We bear within ourselves a weight of death and refusal. Ecological challenges offer us an opportunity to embark once more on the paths of the Gospel. In the biblical sense of the term this is a “favourable time” to strengthen our ties with God by allowing ourselves to be infused with the freshness of the Gospel.

Conclusion

Our faith in Christ offers us a radical choice: “To choose between life and death” (Deuteronomy 30.15). This could not be a timelier invitation. Only genuine conversion will help us mend the ruptures and re-establish our life relationship with nature, our sisters and brothers, and the Creator of Life. For this,



Saint Francis of Assisi presents a beautiful model of renewed humanity and rediscovered harmony.⁷

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- 1 Intergovernmental Panel on *Climate Change (IPCC)*, *Climate Change 2001: Synthesis Report*, United Nations, November 2007. Established by the UN, the IPCC is composed of experts from a number of countries. Its *Synthesis Report* summarizes some 3,000 pages of previous reports.
- 2 John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1990, cited by Archbishop Renato Martino, Statement to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 4 June 1992.
- 3 UN, *2007/2008 Human Development Report, Fighting Climate Change*, 2007.
- 4 John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1990.
- 5 The Canadian average is 20 tons, one of the highest in the world.
- 6 In his Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II talks about “the true nature of the evil which faces us with respect to the development of peoples: it is a question of a moral evil, the fruit of many sins which lead to ‘structures of sin’” (no. 37).
- 7 For further reflection:
 - CCCB Commission for Social Affairs; *You Love All that Exists...All Things Are Yours, God, Lover of Life*, Pastoral Letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative, October 2003.
 - Kairos – Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives, *Re-energizing the Future: Faith and Justice in a Post-Petroleum World*, Toronto, September 2007 (www.kairosCanada.org).