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What does the Church say about ecology?

Concern about safeguarding nature is one of the signs of our times. This article gathers together some doctrinal resources related to the Church's vision of care for creation.

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"What kind of world do we want to leave to those who come after us, to children who are now growing up?"

(...) We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn." (Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 160)

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1. What does the Church say about ecology?

Concern about safeguarding nature is one of the signs of our times, and the Church's reflections on the subject have appeared in Catholic social teaching since the Second Vatican Council.

The Catholic vision, based on the Bible, presents the creation of man as a being intrinsically superior to nature. Its dominion is entrusted to man in order to promote integral human development. But man dominates in the name of God, as a custodian of divine creation, and therefore man's dominion is not absolute. God has entrusted the world to man to manage it responsibly, to ensure integral and sustainable prosperity. Thus, choices and actions related to ecology (i.e., the use of the world created by God)

are as subject to the moral law as all other human choices.

Man's relationship with the world is a constitutive element of human identity. It is a relationship that is born as the fruit of the even deeper union of man with God (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 452). God, in creating man, gave him the responsibility of caring for nature and entrusted to him the task of contributing to the fullness of creation through his work (cf. Gen 1:26-29).

In fact, Christian anthropology leads us to understand that ecological degradation is a result of original sin; our relationship with nature has been damaged. Experience shows that the development of technical progress can have negative consequences for nature. For this reason, the Church sees in the ecological crisis not only a challenge

at the technical-scientific level, but also a moral problem: man forgets the respect due to creation and to the Creator. Christians are called to work for the Kingdom of Heaven from temporal realities, convinced that the more our power increases, the greater our individual and collective responsibility (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 34).

Meditate with St. Josemaría

St. Josemaría's teachings express the Christian message in the language of ecology. They invite us to a passionate love for creation and for the world, preaching a spirituality aimed at sanctifying from within all temporal structures in order to bring them to their fullness in Christ, a key point that illuminates the environmental problem.

- He constantly speaks to us of giving back to matter its noblest meaning, considering that our

faith teaches us that all creation, the movement of the earth and the other heavenly bodies, the good actions of creatures and all the good that has been achieved in history, in short everything, comes from God and is directed toward him. (*Christ is Passing By*, *The Great Unknown*, 130)

- Christ comes to save, not to destroy nature. It is from him that we learn that it is unchristian to treat our fellow men badly, for they are creatures of God, made to his image and likeness. (*Friends of God*, *Human Virtues*, 73)
- The Lord wants his children, those of us who have received the gift of faith, to proclaim the original optimistic view of creation, the love for the world which is at the heart of Christianity. —So there should always be enthusiasm in your

professional work, and in your effort to build up the earthly city. (*Forge*, 703)

2. Ecology in the Scriptures and in the teachings of the Church

Already in Genesis we find the central point in the Church's considerations on ecology: man, created in the image of God, "received the mandate to govern the world in justice and holiness" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 34). God thus entrusted the care of animals, plants and other natural elements to man. It is licit to make use of them for legitimate purposes, such as food, clothing, work or research, always within reasonable limits and in view of caring for and saving human lives (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2417). The use of nature must always

be accompanied by respect, since the world is created by God, its sole owner, who saw everything created as good.

In the New Testament, Jesus comes into the world to restore the order and harmony that sin had destroyed. By healing man's relationship with God, Jesus Christ also reconciles man with the world. Although man's ultimate goal is the Kingdom of Heaven, the first fruits of that new heaven and that new earth are mysteriously already here, in this world. Christians, continuing the work of salvation, are concerned with perfecting this earth, especially insofar as it can contribute to the progress of human society.

This position has also been defended by the great saints of the Church, among whom St. Philip Neri and St. Francis of Assisi (whom St. John Paul II named patron of ecology) stand out

as examples of gentleness towards nature.

Since the Second Vatican Council, all Popes have urged Christians to care for creation: Paul VI welcomed the United Nations' initiative to proclaim a World Environment Day, inviting people to become aware of this issue. St. John Paul II warned against both the temptation to see nature as an object of conquest and the danger of eliminating "man's superior responsibility" by equating the dignity of all living beings. In addition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes several points on respect for the integrity of creation (2415-2418).

Benedict XVI also developed the theme in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (n. 48-52), in which he recalls that "the protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate requires that all

international decision-makers act together and show readiness to act in good faith, in respect for the law and in solidarity with the weaker regions of the planet."

Pope Francis has recently devoted a great deal of effort to promoting ecological awareness, both through his encyclical *Laudato si', On Care for our Common Home*, and through numerous audiences and speeches.

In short, the Church is interested in man's relationship with nature, just as she is interested in all aspects of man's life and his relationship with God: "Nature is the expression of a plan of love and truth. It precedes us and has been given to us by God as a sphere of life. It speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Romans 1:20) and of his love for humanity. It is destined to find 'fullness' in Christ at the end of time (cf. Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:19-20). It too, therefore, is a

'vocation'" (*Caritas in veritate*, 48). Nature is not more important than the human being, but it is part of God's plan and, as such, must be protected and respected.

3. The need for ecological commitment

The behavior of human beings towards nature, in accordance with the above, should be guided by the conviction that nature is a gift that God has placed in their hands.

For this reason, the Church invites us to keep in mind that the use of the earth's goods constitutes a common challenge for all humanity.

Since the ecological question concerns the whole world, we must all feel responsible for sustainable planetary development: it is a

question of a common and universal duty to respect a collective good (cf. *Compendium*, no. 466; *Caritas in veritate*, nos. 49-50).

This responsibility extends not only to the needs of the present, but also to those of the future (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*, n. 467). In the end, we cannot speak of sustainable development without intergenerational solidarity (cf. *Laudato si'*, no. 159).

4. *Laudato si'* and integral ecology

In *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis addresses issues like climate change, the water question, the loss of biodiversity, social degradation, technology, the common destiny of goods, globalization, justice between

generations and the dialogue between religion and science.

Furthermore, the Pope proposes that we think about the various aspects of an integral ecology, which clearly incorporates the human and social dimensions (cf. *Laudato si'*, nos. 137 - 162).

Concerned about the complex link between environmental crisis and poverty, as environmental degradation affects mainly the most disadvantaged, the Pope stresses the need to be guided by criteria of justice and charity in the environmental, social, cultural and economic spheres.

Pope Francis invites us, finally, to an ecological conversion "whereby the effects of the encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in the relationship with the world around us. Living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is

essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience" (*Laudato si'*, no. 217).

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