

Topic 8: Care for Creation

God has given human beings dominion over the world and has commanded them to exercise this authority. Care for the environment is a moral duty for each individual and for all humanity. Ecology is one of the areas in which dialogue between Christians and the followers of other religions is particularly important, so as to bring about mutual cooperation.

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1. Dominion over creation

According to the Book of Genesis, God created man and woman and called them to share in carrying out his plan for creation. This call is shown in the dominion over the world that God confers upon human beings.

The granting of this mission is particularly expressed in three texts of Genesis:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (Gen 1:26).

“And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’” (Gen 1:28).

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15).

God has given to human beings the power to participate intelligently and freely in perfecting the harmony of creation, for each person’s own good and for that of the rest of mankind.^[1] God makes human beings his co-workers.

The original divine plan was that men and women, living in harmony with God, with one another and with the world,^[2] should direct not only themselves but also the whole universe to the Creator, so that

creation would give glory to God through them.^[3]

“Creation was fashioned with a view to the sabbath and therefore for the worship and adoration of God.

Worship is inscribed in the order of creation” (cf. Gen 1:14).^[4]

This dominion, which extends to the whole visible world and to all the resources contained there,^[5] is granted to all men and women. The following consequences can be drawn from this:

a) *Absolute ownership* of the earth belongs to God: “The earth is the LORD's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Ps 24:1).^[6] Man is simply the steward of a good.

b) Nature is not something that has no owner, but rather it is the patrimony of all mankind. Therefore,

its use must redound to the benefit of all.^[7]

c) Each person “should regard the external things that he legitimately possesses not only as his own but also as common in the sense that they should be able to benefit not only him but also others.”^[8]

2. The image of God in man, the foundation of man’s dominion

Man, insofar as he has a bodily dimension, has a certain likeness to other creatures. However, inasmuch as he possesses a spiritual dimension, he has a genuine affinity with God, since he has been created in the divine image and likeness, and God has promised him immortality.

The image of God in man is the foundation of his power over creation:

“Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.”^[9]

The condition of being in the image of God also indicates *the way to exercise his dominion*: men and women must subordinate the possession, dominion and use of created realities to the divine likeness and to the human being’s vocation to immortality.^[10]

“The task is ‘to have dominion’ over the other created beings, ‘to cultivate the garden.’ This is to be accomplished within the framework of obedience to the divine law and therefore with respect for the image received, the image which is the clear foundation of the power of dominion recognized as belonging to

man as the means to his perfection.”^[11]

As the image of God, human beings share in divine wisdom and God’s sovereignty over the world.^[12] And precisely for this reason, they must *approach the earth with the same attitude as the Creator*, who is not only all-powerful, but also governs the world in his loving Providence. Consequently, human beings must act on earth “in holiness and righteousness . . . in uprightness of soul” (Wis 9:3), with wisdom and love,^[13] “as an intelligent and noble ‘master’ and ‘guardian,’ and not as a heedless ‘exploiter’ and ‘destroyer.’”^[14] Thus, through the human being, God’s providence over the world is made visible and effective.

Mankind has received the mission *to perfect the world, not to destroy it*; to transform it not into chaos, “but into

a beautiful dwelling place where everything is respected.”^[15] This capacity of the human being is not an absolute power, as such power only belongs to God, and much less is it a despotic power to “use and abuse” or to dispose of things as one pleases.^[16]

“Certainly humanity has received from God himself the task of ‘dominating’ the created world and ‘cultivating the garden’ of the world. But this is a task that humanity must carry out in respect for the divine image received, and, therefore, with intelligence and with love, assuming responsibility for the gifts that God has bestowed and continues to bestow.”^[17]

The concept of *stewardship* is a particularly apt way of expressing the human being’s task with regard to the world.^[18] We have received the gift of the created world in order to be its steward, for our own

perfection and that of our fellow human beings.^[19]

3. Work in God's plan

Men and women carry out God's commandment regarding the world – to till and care for the earth – through work. Work is not, therefore, imposed on the human being as a consequence of original sin, but forms part of God's plan from the beginning:

“From the beginning of creation man has had to work. This is not something that I have invented. It is enough to turn to the opening pages of the Bible. There you can read that, before sin entered the world, and in its wake death, punishment and misery, God made Adam from the clay of the earth, and created for him and his descendants this beautiful world we live in, *ut operaretur et*

custodiret illum, so that we might cultivate it and look after it.

“We must be convinced therefore that work is a magnificent reality, and that it has been imposed on us as an inexorable law which, one way or another, binds everyone, even though some may try to seek exemption from it. Make no mistake about it. Man's duty to work is not a consequence of original sin, nor is it just a discovery of modern times. It is an indispensable means which God has entrusted to us here on this earth. It is meant to fill out our days and make us sharers in God's creative power. It enables us to earn our living and, at the same time, to reap 'the fruits of eternal life' (Jn 4:36), for 'man is born to work as the birds are born to fly' (Job 5:7).”^[20]

When man “develops the earth by the work of his hands or with the aid of technology, in order that it might

bear fruit and become a dwelling worthy of the whole human family,”^[21] while providing for his own sustenance and that of his family, he renders a service to society; he cooperates personally so that God’s own work of creation may be developed and completed, so that the divine plan in history may be fulfilled, and with this action he also perfects himself.^[22]

The social dimension of the human person implies that we are necessarily interconnected, and therefore are in need of one another. In a certain sense, this reality is an expression of being created in the image of God. God himself is a community of persons who share the highest good. Similarly, through work and service, men and women make present God’s care for each person and, in like manner, they receive God’s care through the work and service of others.

4. Ecology. The lordship of man and the value of nature

The term “ecology” (from the Greek *oikía*, meaning “house”) applies above all to the human being’s relationship with nature.

In recent decades, the Church’s teachings with regard to ecology and the environment have been abundant.^[23] Without getting into specific solutions, which do not fall within the competence of her teaching authority, the Church offers important principles which constitute an indispensable guide for the relationship of the human person with the world.

Nature, at the service of the human person

Nature has a value that is objective, but not absolute. The gift of the earth has been given to mankind so that it

may serve all men and women and, united with them, glorify God.

Thus nature shares in the same vocation of service that the human being also has.^[24]

“Every kind of life should be respected, fostered and indeed loved, as the creation of the Lord God, who created everything ‘good.’ But it is precisely the special value of human life that counsels, in fact compels us, to examine carefully the way we use the other created species.”^[25]

Therefore, in order to safeguard nature, “the decisive issue,” Benedict XVI stressed, “is the overall moral tenor of society. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it,

that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves.”^[26]

The life of other created beings is also of great value, but this value is not opposed to that of the human person. On the contrary, the value of animal and plant life acquires its full meaning if it is placed in relation to the life of the human person. Pope Francis draws attention to the obvious incoherence of opposing these two values:

“At times we see an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure.”^[27] “A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature

cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings.”^[28]

Respect for nature

“Human intervention is not ‘creative’; it encounters a material nature which like itself has its origin in God the Creator and of which mankind has been constituted the ‘noble and wise guardian.’”^[29]

Nature is not the work of man, but of God. Its value is not what man wants to give it, seeing himself as its measure. It is at his service: not at the service of his whims, but rather of his perfection as a person. It has its own finality and a destiny previously given by God.^[30]

These characteristics of nature imply that man’s action in the world “must not make use of nature against his own good, the good of his fellow human beings and the good of future

generations. That is why there is a moral dimension to the concept and practice of development which must in every case be respected.”^[31]

Consequently, the law that must govern the human being’s relationship with the world is not the *law of utility*, established by a reason which is driven exclusively by economic ends, and which would consider nature simply as available material to be made use of.

The need for conversion and care for nature

Education in *ecological responsibility* – that is to say, in responsibility for oneself, for others and for the environment – must therefore have conversion, the inner change of the person, as its primary goal.^[32]

Pope Francis regrets that “some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and

pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an ‘ecological conversion,’ whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. 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.”^[33]

The Christian vocation, understood in this manner, entails a new way of acting in relation to others and towards nature. Such conduct requires overcoming attitudes and lifestyles driven by selfishness, which are the cause of the depletion of natural resources.^[34] In this perspective, the protection of the environment comes to be seen as a

moral obligation incumbent on each individual and on all humanity. This duty will not only be seen in terms of a concern for nature, but also as the responsibility of each person for the common good and the plans of God.

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The obligation to contribute to the clean-up of the environment concerns everyone. “All the more should men and women who believe in God the Creator, and who are thus convinced that there is a well-defined unity and order in the world, feel called to address the problem. Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.”^[36]

In the specific field of the human being’s relations with the world, Christians also need to carry out the task of spreading moral values and

contributing to education in ecological awareness.^[37]

Precisely because of its global character, ecology is one of the areas in which the dialogue of Christians with the faithful of other religions is particularly important, so as to establish mutual cooperation.^[38]

Basic bibliography

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Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *Working for God*, in *Friends of God*, 55-72.

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^[1] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 307.

^[2] Cf. Saint John Paul II, General Audience 17 January 2001, 1.

^[3] Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 34. “Creation is called to join with man in glorifying God (cf. Ps 148 and 96)": Saint John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990 (8 December 1989), 16. The glory that nature renders to the Creator is expressed in an admirable way in the Song of the Three Young Men (Dan 3:52-90).

^[4] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 347.

^[5] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 25 March 1995, 42.

^[6] See also Jos 22:19; Hos 9:3; Ps 85:2; Jer 16:18; Ezek 36:5.

^[7] Cf. Saint Paul VI, Message of His Holiness Paul VI to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Environment, 1 June 1972.

^[8] *Gaudium et Spes*, 69. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2402-2404. “The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others” (Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015, 95).

^[9] Saint John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 14 September 1981, 4.

^[10] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30 December 1987, 29.

^[11] *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30.

^[12] Cf. *Evangelium vitae*, 42.

^[13] Cf. Saint John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, 3.

^[14] Saint John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, 4 March 1979, 15.

^[15] Saint Paul VI, Message of His Holiness Paul VI to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Environment, 1 June 1972.

^[16] Cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 34; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2415.

^[17] Saint John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, 30 October 1988, 43.

^[18] Cf. Saint John Paul II, General Audience 17 January 2001, 1-2.

^[19] Cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 30; *Laudato si'*, 68.

^[20] Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God*, no. 57; cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 34.

^[21] *Gaudium et Spes*, 57.

^[22] Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 34 and 57.

^[23] In continuity with the teachings of Saint Paul VI, Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* stands out for its great impact, not only in the Catholic sphere, which has given rise to interesting initiatives throughout the world in favour of care for the human person and the environment.

^[24] “God wills the *interdependence of creatures*.... They exist only in dependence on one another, to complement and serve one another” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 340).

^[25] Saint John Paul II, Discourse, 18 May 1990, 4. Cf. also Saint John Paul II, Declaration of Venice, 10 June

2002, which affirms that “respect for creation stems from respect for human life and dignity.”

^[26] Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 29 June 2009, 51.

^[27] *Laudato si'*, 90.

^[28] *Laudato si'*, 91.

^[29] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Libertatis conscientia*, 22 March 1986, 34.

^[30] Cf. *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 34; Saint John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990; Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, 1 May 1991, 37.

^[31] Saint John Paul II, Discourse, 18 May 1990, 4. The root of the moral reaction to the impact of our actions on others and on the environment is, says Pope Francis, “disinterested concern for others, and the rejection

of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption" (*Laudato si'*, 208).

^[32] Saint John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, 13.

^[33] *Laudato si'*, 217.

^[34] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 22 January 1999, 25.

^[35] Cf. Saint John Paul II, Discourse, 18 May 1990, 4. There are many appeals of the Magisterium to our moral responsibility with regard to ecology: cf. among other places, *Centesimus annus*, 40; *Evangelium vitae*, 42; Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, 25; Discourse, 18 August 1985, 2; Message 8 December 1989, 15.

^[36] Saint John Paul, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990, 15: quoted in *Laudato si'*, 64.

[37] Declaration of Venice.

[38] Cf. Saint John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, 14 September 1998, 104; Saint John Paul II, Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1990 (8 December 1989), 15; *Laudato si'*, 7.

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