

HUMANITY'S RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD CREATION – AN ETHICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

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What is at stake?

1. We should inquire how the different cultures of humanity relate to nature. Cultures shape human minds and give us an insight into humanity's readiness or not to accept changing its attitude in dealing with its natural environment. The purpose of our joint session is precisely to allow natural and social scientists to interact on the question of the interchanges between Humanity and Nature. So many conferences and symposiums have been dedicated to that issue, yet mainly with a descriptive and analytical approach. The perspective obviously affects not only social planners; it already has a profound impact on the daily living conditions of millions of people who have no proper access to water, food, shelter, healthy air and a future for their children.

Issues include concern for demographic growth, the economic imbalance between advanced industrial countries and less developed countries, the destruction of environmental capital resources. Resources are becoming exhausted, climate is changing; pollution devastates large cities; oceans are dying; population is increasing; nations close themselves in search of identity; globalisation progresses promising benefits yet arousing fears. International conventions try to rally governments to take preventive measures. Yet only one development model prevails.

The western development model relies on the assumption of an unlimited capacity of nature. It has exported worldwide its modes of exploitation and devastation of whatever the earth can produce. But other cultures also have little consideration for the precariousness of nature's resources.

As long as nature appeared as a huge inexhaustible reservoir, it could be exploited without fear. Now we have enough evidence that we cannot continue with the same scheme. Nature's resources are limited, some are renewable, and some are coming to an end.

2. Among scholars there are large areas of consensus with respect to decisions which have to be taken on a global scale. But these decisions are necessarily political. They involve all cultures and political systems, peoples

who are more or less informed about the real situation, more or less keen to abandon their dream to have a quick share in the richness of the North.

Three ecologic schools try to win adherents throughout the world, with the help of the media and the standardisation of human minds.

- The first one is shared by the political ecological movements for the moment. Environmental ecology still considers that humanity cannot live except in harmony with nature, even if nature plays the leading role in dictating its terms to humanity.
- The next is utilitarian ecology which denies any distinction between human life and animal life. All are sensate beings and want to avoid or at least lessen suffering. Well-being is seen as the absence of suffering whether physical or moral. Euthanasia is accepted as a means to promote well-being. Animals have as many rights as human to exist.
- The third class is deep ecology which maintains that nature has rights and humans have duties. The biosphere is the all-encompassing reality which prevails over all its components. In the biosphere the only danger is man as a predator both for other species and for nature. Nature is a subject. In order to let life develop freely, some in the vanguard even suggest that humanity should not exceed half a billion people.

Faced with the growing damage imposed by human action upon Nature, this new holistic ideology has set its objective: restore the autonomy of Nature by eliminating human impact on it.

This ideology has made room for a new kind of religion. The earth should be considered as a living entity – called Gaia. Gaia breathes and thinks through the humanity it has begotten. Through the Internet a common way of thinking is emerging that will impose itself, and Gaia will prevail over its adversaries. At the Earth Summit of Rio, as early as 1992, this new religion found proselytisers with the clear objective to supplant a Christianity that they accused of all sorts of evils.

A correct concept of nature

Something must change in our relationship with nature. After the analysis of the crisis, the time for action arrives. And action is ethical. It calls for responsibility, objectives, and convictions.

If we do not deliver a message of hope in some precise directions, our work will be useless. The new ideologies claim that the Jewish-Christian paradigm of Genesis (“go and subdue all creation”) is responsible for the devastation of the earth. Nothing is more false than such an assertion. Our Academy has dedicated one of its first sessions to Work. I had the opportu-

nity in that session to develop the meaning of work in the Bible and in the understanding of millions of people on earth.

The specific task of this Joint Meeting is to work out the relationship between Humanity and Nature. In this endeavour, the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) has a particular contribution to offer. The SDC offers a challenge both to the irresponsible devastation of Nature and to mistreating Humanity as a definite enemy of Nature. The SDC considers Humanity as the centre and the aim of the whole creation. Nature has been entrusted to Humanity like a garden to be cultivated with care, not for the use or misuse of a few, but in order to share its fruits with all for a decent life on earth.

Yet Humanity and Nature are not on the same level. Humanity is the subject. Nature is the object to take care of. It is the responsibility of Humanity to keep Nature “sustainable”. Devastation of Nature and exploitation of its resources have been performed by Humanity. Humanity has to be aware of the disastrous result of years of uncontrolled devastation of Nature. Now the time has come to change the paradigm.

Most contributions from PAS belong to the first step to be performed: becoming aware of the present situation and working out perspectives for the coming years. But this first step has to be completed by another one: which lever can we reasonably resort to in order to provoke a new orientation in the way Humanity deals with Nature.

Human behavior resorts to mental paradigms. The relationship of humanity with nature will never result from communication campaigns, scholarly evidence, and political options. It asks for deeper mental representations and implicit evidence. Some of these deeply based representations may have little objective connection with the huge problems at stake. Some may help in understanding the challenge. In the Jewish-Christian tradition, there is one fundamental belief which governs the others. The world of nature is the creation of God who is not nature. The distinction between Creator and creation is basic.

All that exists proceeds from God's will, the physical, animal and human world. So in dealing with the relationship between humans and nature there appears a third element in play which changes the deal. If God is God, all humans and all creatures proceed from him. Creation or nature is what God entrusted to human beings. And human beings consider themselves as related to the same origin. From this derives a common feeling of fundamental equality between all these human beings, and a common responsibility towards this creation entrusted to them.

Where there is no reference to any transcendental Being, or to any common ultimate horizon of meaning, I doubt we could find among humans

the deep and unquestionable feeling that something has to be undertaken in common in order to save the future of our environment.

The awareness that God is a common Father of all humans and that nature must not be spoiled for the benefit of few, but should rather provide resources for all is grounded in deep religious paradigms that you will never be able to replace with reasoning, statistics and international conferences.

On all these issues, the Catholic Church has made specific contributions. Its main concern is to work out what is common to all persons and communities in order to obtain a collective change in our way of dealing with energy sources, in our methods of production and habits of consumption. The common foundation is always the dignity of the human person. Hence convincing people to move to more responsibility in dealing with natural goods appeals to the very conception we have of humanity itself.

The issue is anthropological

So the anthropological question is at the core of our PAS/PASS 2014 Joint Session. In his enlightened teaching, Pope Benedict often spoke of “human ecology”. This expression cannot be understood as a concession to holistic ideologies. It has to be put in its right anthropological context. Human persons are not objects but subjects of their interaction with nature. The idea is twofold: humans are a product of evolution, they are part of nature, but at the same time, they are the only species that has transformed nature in order to survive and to improve its living conditions. They are the only species able to reflect on what they are doing. Humans relate to nature as groups with specific cultures or representations of their place in nature. Looking at the history of civilization, what characterized the switch from pre-history to history is precisely the conquest of more rational dominion over nature, the organization into cities, and later communication through writing.

The first known civilizations developed huge representations of the place of man in the cosmos, between fear of its tremendous might and ability to capture its potentialities. Political power was thought as having to regulate human activity in agriculture and governance in accordance with the cosmic cycles. Humans indeed had the intuition that nature was a tremendous divine entity.

All schools of Greek philosophy considered the cosmos as eternal and thus divine. The powers of nature were object of worship and submission.

Something radically changed with the Bible. The world was no longer an eternal entity; it was the work of a creator God. The whole creation had a purpose which appears at the end of the Genesis chapter on the creation of man and woman. God entrusted all of creation to them: “be fruitful, multiply

fill the earthy and subdue it. Be master of the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth” (Gn 1, 28–29). So creation is not a blind or alien eternal reality which subdues humans endowed with intelligence and feeling. There is an inner connection between humans and nature. Thus emerges the sense of responsibility for humanity. Through his partners, namely, men and women, God continues his creative work. Humanity is associated with an endless process. God perpetually creates and protects his creation, not alone but with human collaboration.

The enlightenment movement in the 18th century was alien to the idea of an ongoing creative work of God. Most of the leading philosophers of that time shared the idea of a Creator who is mentioned as such in the American *Declaration of Independence*, or elsewhere under the abstract concept of “Supreme Being”. They rejected in fact the biblical teaching of a loving Creator who continues to take care of his creature. But they still had the idea of an ultimate Being who initiated all that exists and left it in the hands of humanity. So the Jewish-Christian tradition of the Creator and the western philosophy of the initiator of all that exists developed side by side for some time, without creating major clashes.

In both contexts, humans are thought of as being responsible for what occurs to nature. The gap between secular thinking and religion-based thinking appeared in the step that came afterwards.

In the secularized context, humanity considers itself as bound by no other law than the one it decides upon. In the traditional Jewish-Christian context, it is considered that there is an inherent order in the world which reflects the Reason of creation itself. Human intelligence is participation in the absolute intelligence which created the world. In this second case, there is a natural law understood as the right order of things as disclosed to human reason. The apprehension of this order is subject to progress and modification, in a deepening process of closer knowledge of the right order.

Natural law does not relate to the order of the physical world, but to the order of man in society, which is precisely the realm that modern thinking has preferred to leave to the arbitration of individual and social will.

Nature is challenged by culture, just as reality is challenged by its representation. In a time when nanotechnologies are able to replace brain cells and repair our neurons, what would nature be if not a raw material offered to our skills and power? Nature appears no longer as resistant data. Nearly nothing still resists to our will. Human will is now the last horizon of our future. It serves as a substitute for objective reasoning.

As long as we were under the regime of reason, we could expect to progress to an ever-growing objective knowledge of what exists, of the in-

herent order of things. Under the dominion of human will, everything is possible, the worst being more likely to have the advantage over the best. The shift from reason to will is not new. We only experience its consequences. It started with modern thinking when “*voluntas non veritas facit legem*”, as Hobbes nicely said.

The Social Doctrine of the Church

Sustainability of nature unavoidably has the advantage over humanity as its competitor. Yet the question could be approached differently if we start with the only thinking subject, namely humanity. Humanity is responsible for all the damage inflicted to nature. Humanity cannot survive without nature. Nature cannot survive without a mental conversion of humanity. So the right way is to start with the responsibility of man toward nature today and tomorrow.

This approach belongs to the sphere of human ethics.

This is why the social doctrine of the Church warns about the consequences of a world in which reason would be disguised as mere dominion of will, obviously the will of the more powerful.

If there is no inherent order in human behavior and human relationships, there is no right order for humanity to deal with nature and its resources. Otherwise everything is possible, as we can see.

As it has often been reminded in this room, the social doctrine of the Church relies on the assumption that man in nature is the creation of God and that the right relationship between human communities and their natural environment is in a way inscribed in the depth of our being.

The principles which govern our humanity in relation to nature are not arbitrary products of our will, but perceptions of our reason, as illuminated by divine revelation. These principles are the dignity of each single human person, the need for all human communities to work for the common good and the principle of the common destination of all the goods of the earth. This latter principle plays a particular role with respect to sustainability. Indeed, considering the human person under the concept of nature has little in common with the general consensus that seems to be shared in international debates today.

The world and its richness belong to all the human family. This is the ethical foundation of the whole issue of humanity towards nature. It has to be understood in the perspective of what we have said of the world entrusted to man in order to be developed for the advantage of all.

Once western thinking left God aside, nature was no longer a creature, but took the place of the Ultimate Being. It is not an exaggeration to see the

present ideological trends concerning Mother Earth as a return to the antique holistic philosophies, with the evident consequence that humanity becomes a mute part of a whole instead of being in charge of its stewardship.

Our concern is that we will never find a way out of the deterioration of nature as long as humans are not individually and collectively convinced that they bear responsibility for it. The social doctrine of the Church has always considered that ethical behavior is dictated by freedom. It would certainly be utopian to expect that a change in the way humanity deals with its natural environment could be obtained without the inner conviction of the all people involved.