Address to the Study Week on the Subject 'Man and his Environment. Tropical Forests and the Conservation of Species'

The Pope deplores the depletion of the 'earth's tropical biodiversity' and the tropical forests, and stresses that this threatens many forms of life and the quality of human life. The unjustified search for profit is one factor; the fight against poverty another; the consequences of third world debt yet another. Population pressure is often cited as a further factor, yet not all demographic expansion is 'incompatible with orderly development'. His Holiness emphasises that the 'Church untiringly upholds the freedom of couples to decide about children according to the moral law and their religious belief'. Man is a steward of nature and his stewardship must conform to divine will; thus 'ecological commitment' forms a part of man's 'responsibilities within God's designs'.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It is with special pleasure that I welcome the distinguished men and women of science who have been taking part in the study week organised by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in conjunction with the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences on the subject of 'Tropical Forests and the Conservation of Species'. The topic you have been studying is of immense importance. It is to the undeniable credit of scientists that the value of the biodiversity of tropical ecosystems is coming to be more and more understood and appreciated. However, the extent of the depletion of the earth's tropical biodiversity is indeed a very serious problem: it threatens countless other forms of life. Even the quality of human life, because of its dependence on the dynamic interaction of other species, is being impoverished.

2. Tropical forests deserve our attention, study and protection. As well as making an essential contribution to the regulation of the earth's climatic conditions, they possess one of the richest varieties of the earth's species, the beauty of which merits our profound aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, some plants and microorganisms of these forests are capable of synthesising unlimited numbers of complex substances of great potential to the production of medicines and antibiotics. Other plants possess value as sources of food or as a means of genetically improving strains of edible plants.

Unfortunately, the rate at which these forests are being destroyed or altered is depleting their biodiversity so quickly that many species may never be catalogued or studied for their possible value to human beings. Is it possible, then, that the indiscriminate destruction of tropical forests is going to prevent future generations from benefiting from the riches of these ecosystems in Asia,

Africa and Latin America? Should a concept of development in which profit is predominant continue to disrupt the lives of the native populations which inhabit these forests? Should a lack of foresight continue to harm the dynamic processes of the earth, civilisation and human life itself?

3. If an unjustified search for profit is sometimes responsible for the deforestation of tropical ecosystems and the loss of their biodiversity, it is also true that a desperate fight against poverty threatens to deplete these important resources of the planet. Thus, while certain forms of industrial development have induced some countries to deplete dramatically the size of their tropical forests, foreign debt has forced other countries to administer unwisely their hardwood resources in the hope of reducing that debt. And likewise, the attempt to create lands for farming, pasture or grazing is sometimes an unfortunate proof of how inappropriate means can be used for good or even necessary aims. In this case the solution of an urgent problem can create another equally serious one.

Population pressure is very often cited as a major cause of the destruction of tropical forests. Here though, it is essential to state that demographic expansion is not simply a matter of statistics; it is a cultural and profoundly moral issue. Indeed, not 'all demographic expansion is incompatible with orderly development'.1 Besides condemning the pressures, including economic ones, to which people are subjected, especially in the poorer countries, in order to force them to submit to population control programmes, the Church untiringly upholds the freedom of couples to decide about children according to the moral law and their religious belief.2

4. Every kind of life should be respected, fostered and indeed loved, as the creation of the Lord God, who created everything 'good'.3 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. There is no doubt that man is entitled to make use of the rest of creation: the Creator himself gave to mankind, as well as to the animals, 'all plants and seeds and fruit trees' in order to sustain their lives in this world.4 This gift, however, together with the command to 'dominate the earth',5 is subject to two limits set by God the Creator.

The first one is man himself. He 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 pratice of development which must in every case be respected.

The second limit is created beings themselves; or rather, the will of God as expressed in their nature. Man is not allowed to do what he wishes and how he wishes with the creatures around him. On the contrary, he is supposed to 'keep' and 'cultivate' them, as taught in the Biblical narrative of creation.6 The very fact that God 'gave' mankind the plants to eat and the garden 'to keep' implies that God's will is to be respected when dealing with his creatures. They are 'entrusted' to us, not simply put at our disposal. We are stewards, not absolute masters. For this reason, the use of created beings implies moral obligations.7 Ecological commitment is not only a question of concern for natural beings and the atmosphere around them. It is a question of morality, and therefore of man's responsibilities within God's designs. In this context, man's ultimate well-being may be summed up as 'peace with God the Creator, peace with all of

creation'.8

5. Today, the work of scientists such as yourselves is becoming more and more important. An intense programme of information and education is needed. In particular, your study and research can contribute to fostering an enlightened moral commitment, more urgent now than ever. I trust that the conclusions of your seminar, together with your personal work and responsible commitment as men and women of science, will help very much towards the attainment of such an aim. In this way, the present ecological crisis, especially grave in the case of the tropical forests, will become an occasion for a renewed consciousness of man's true place in this world and of his relationship to the environment. The created universe has been given to mankind not for selfish measures but for the glory of God, which consists, as Saint Irenaeus said many centuries ago, in 'the living man'.9
I encourage you and invoke upon you Almighty God's abundant blessings.

1 John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 25.

2 Cf. *Ibid.*; also *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 30.

3 Cf. *Gn* 1:31.

4 Cf. *Ibid.* 1:29-30.

5 Cf. *Ibid.,* 1:26.

6 Cf. *Ibid.,* 2:15.

7 Cf. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 34, and the *1990 World Day of Peace Message*, n. 6 ff.

8 John Paul II, *1990 World Day of Peace Message.*

9 St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV, 20, 7.

© Wed Mar 13 08:30:11 CET 2024 - The Pontifical Academy of Sciences