



PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM  
DE IUSTITIA ET PACE

## **Protect the Earth, Dignify Humanity:**

### **The Moral Dimensions of Climate Change and Sustainable Development**

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Our topic and task, in the words of today's title, is to "Protect the Earth, Dignify Humanity". The subtitle would have us grasp "climate change and sustainable development" by insisting upon their "moral dimensions". We will indeed come to grips with the problems if, and only if, the stand we take is substantially human and moral.

Out of this title and sub-title, let me focus on three points to frame the discussion:

- The title states the problems as imperatives – the earth *needs to be* protected, humanity *needs to be* dignified.
- The subtitle, secondly, names the solutions as course correction – to manage climate change and to promote sustainable development.
- As the problems are vast and the solutions long-running, thirdly, the solutions cannot be merely technical, nor our commitments merely contractual. Rather, they must be grounded in morality, oriented by morality and measured in terms of human flourishing and well-being.

#### **The problems as imperatives**

Although the problems we face are striking, even frightening, we do appreciate and affirm the great achievements of the last two centuries. Remarkable scientific, technological and economic progress has significant numbers enjoying lifespans, livelihoods and lifestyles unimaginable for our ancestors. The last few decades have witnessed hundreds of millions lifted out of extreme poverty along with accelerated travel, transportation and communications.

But this progress has its dark sides and unacceptable costs. Despite the generation of great wealth, we find starkly rising disparities – vast numbers of people excluded and discarded, their dignity trampled upon. As global society increasingly defines itself by consumerist and monetary values, the privileged in turn become increasingly numb to the cries of the poor.

At least three billion of the seven billion inhabitants of the planet are mired in poverty, a third of them in extreme poverty, while a privileged global elite of about one billion people control the bulk of the wealth and consumes the bulk of resources. Consider the consequences in one sector: food. Today the world produces more than enough food to feed its 7.3 billion inhabitants, but over 800 million (over 11%) go hungry, while the FAO estimates that each

year, approximately one-third of all food produced for human consumption in the world is lost or wasted.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond all shame, many of our fellow men, women and children are treated as mere instruments of labour, of profit or of pleasure, especially through human trafficking and modern forms of slavery.

Pope Francis rightly deplores all this: the “throwaway culture”, the new forms of slavery, and the “globalization of indifference”. They are poisonous. They thwart human purpose, choke human potential, and affront human dignity.

Focussing on the natural environment, indifference, abusive treatment and the throwaway approach also apply to how we treat the natural world, the planet Earth, the garden that was given to us as our home.

Human beings are part of nature. From conception to the moment of death, the life of every person is integrated with and sustained by the awesome panoply of natural processes. This calls for a reciprocal response on the part of humanity – to nourish and sustain the earth, the garden, that in turn nourishes and sustains us. Today, the ever-accelerating burning of fossil fuels that powers our economic engine is disrupting the earth’s delicate ecological balance on almost-unfathomable scale.

In our recklessness, we are traversing some of the planet’s most fundamental natural boundaries. And the lesson from the Garden of Eden still rings true today – pride, hubris, self-centredness are always perilous, indeed destructive. The very technology that has brought great reward is now poised to bring great ruin.

Climate-related disasters are a reality both for poor countries on the margins of the modern economy and for those at its heart. Consider the devastating droughts from California to Syria to Africa. Consider the increasing prevalence of extreme weather events, which always hit the poor hardest. For example, a typhoon devastated the Philippines in 2013, killing about 6,000 people. In the Philippines, as is the case in many countries worldwide, people in such situations are simply too poor to protect themselves. They are at the mercy of nature’s fury.

### **The solutions as course correction**

Let me turn now to solutions. We clearly need a fundamental change of course, to protect the earth and its people – which in turn will allow us to “dignify humanity”.

Everything stems from the essential principle that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and thus possessing an innate dignity that can never be denied, degraded, or denigrated. That means treating every single person as a brother or a sister – with a relationship based on respect, reconciliation, and solidarity.

It also means recognizing that everything that God has created is good, precious, and valuable – and that God has given all of us this planet as a gift, to provide for our needs. And the correct response to receiving such a magnificent gift is surely one of gratitude, love and respect.

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<sup>1</sup> FAO, *Food wastage footprint, Impacts on natural resources. Summary report*, 2013, p. 6.

According to the Book of Genesis, God the Creator charged us *to till* the earth and *to keep* it (Gn 2:15). These balanced concepts of “tilling” and “keeping” imply a vital and reciprocal relationship between humanity and the created world. Every person and every community has a sacred duty to draw prudently, respectfully and gratefully from the goodness of the earth, and to care for it in a way that assures its continued fruitfulness for generations to come. Those who till and keep the land also have a great responsibility to share its fruits with others – especially the poor, the dispossessed, the stranger, the forgotten. The Hebrew-Christian Scripture is unequivocal about this – the gift of the land is a gift for all. The global atmosphere, the oceans, the forests, and other natural resources are common goods of mankind. Like others, Pope Francis has asserted that the earth is not just a legacy from our parents, but a loan from our children, so we must protect and care for it with great tenderness and with a keen sense of inter-generational solidarity. At the same time, the prophet Isaiah brilliantly links the environmental degradation with human behaviour: “The earth languishes for the sins of man.”<sup>2</sup>

To till and to keep does not prohibit humanity from making use of the earth’s gifts. But at the same time, the current economic-developmental model is out of balance.

It is blatantly clear that we have “tilled too much” and “kept too little”. Our relationship with the Creator; with our neighbour, especially the poor; and with the environment has become fundamentally “unkept”.

We must move away from this mode of behaviour, and instead become more protective, more “keeping”.

In practical terms, we need innovative and sustainable technological and economic solutions, as well as brave and determined political leadership exercised at various levels including the global one.<sup>3</sup> We need to shift away from an unthinking infatuation with GDP and a single-minded zeal for accumulation. We need to learn to work together toward sustainable development, in a framework that links economic prosperity with both social inclusion and protection of the natural world.

We need the community of nations to embrace this concept of “sustainable development”. In this great quest, 2015 will be a defining year. Three major conferences – on financing development in Addis Ababa in July, on SDGs in New York in September, and on climate change in Paris at the end of November – must come to grips with the problems and agree on proportionate remedies.

### **The grounding in morality**

Let me finally turn to the moral foundation, guidelines, and criteria. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew clearly and compellingly situates the problematic:

“It follows that, to commit a crime against the natural world, is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation... for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands... for humans to injure other humans

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Isaiah, ch. 24.

<sup>3</sup> In a different but related context, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace reflected deeply on the global financial crisis, cf. *Towards reforming the international financial and monetary systems in the context of global public authority*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011.

with disease... for humans to contaminate the Earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life, with poisonous substances... these are sins.’<sup>4</sup>

Without moral conversion and change of hearts, even good regulations, policies, and targets in the world are unlikely to prove effective. Without this ethical foundation, humanity will lack the courage (moral substance) to carry out even the most sensible policy proposals. Yet without effective policies, our moral energy is all-too-easily dispersed.

This is an all-embracing moral imperative: to protect and care for both creation, our garden home, and the human person who dwells herein – and to take action to achieve this. If the dominant, pervasive ethos is selfishness and individualism, sustainable development will not come about. For progress towards sustainability requires a fundamental openness to relationship or, in other words, justice and responsibility, opening up new avenues of solidarity.

Citizens of wealthier countries must stand shoulder to shoulder with the poor, both at home and overseas. They have a special obligation to help their brothers and sisters in developing countries to cope with climate change by mitigating its effects and by assisting with adaptation. A simple analogy might help make this clear. Imagine ten people walking in a vast desert. Two of the ten people have already drunk half of the group’s combined supply of water. The other eight are growing weak from thirst. And there is no more water in sight. In such a desperate situation, the two who have drunk their fill have a moral duty to scout ahead to find an oasis. When they find it, they have a moral duty to guide the rest of the group there, making sure that no life is lost.

As this suggests, the wealthiest countries, the ones who have benefitted most from fossil fuels, are morally obligated to push forward and find solutions to climate-related change and so protect the environment and human life. They are obliged both to reduce their own carbon emissions and to help protect poorer countries from the disasters caused or exacerbated by the excesses of industrialization.

This moral obligation extends to all – political leaders, corporate leaders, civil society, and ordinary people too. Corporations and financial investors must learn to put long-term sustainability over short-term profit, and to recognize that the financial bottom line is secondary to, and at the service of, the common good. And every single person of good will is summoned by an inner call to embrace the personal virtues that ground sustainable development – and the most important of these is an enfolding charity that radiates outwards from the self to others, from those alive today to those not yet born.

In this core moral space, the world’s religions play a vital role. These traditions all affirm the inherent dignity of every individual linked to the common good of all humanity. They affirm the need for an economy of inclusion and opportunity, where all can flourish and fulfil their God-given purpose. They affirm the beauty, wonder, and inherent goodness of the natural world, and appreciate that it is a precious gift entrusted to our common care – making it our moral duty to respect rather than ravage, to keep rather than lay waste, to protect rather than plunder, to steward rather than sabotage, the garden which is our home and shared inheritance of natural resources.

These religious insights can help orient and integrate human beings within the wider universe, to identify what is truly valuable, what we protect and sustain as sacred. Within the

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<sup>4</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, Speech at the Environmental Symposium, Santa Barbara, U.S.A., 8.11.1997.

Christian tradition, what more radical charter for sustainable development can we find than the Beatitudes; the call for generosity, mercy, and encounter that permeates *Evangelii Gaudium*? What better role model for the virtues of sustainable development than St. Francis of Assisi, who lived his life based on kinship and fraternity with creation, creatures, and the poor?

I know that each tradition represented here today can draw from similarly deep roots.

We therefore need to cultivate a new set of values and virtues – including *conservation* of the environment, *compassion* for the excluded, *courage* to take bold decisions, and a *commitment* to work together in common purpose for the global common good. We need a full conversion of hearts and minds, habits and lifestyles, structures and institutions.

Ultimately, it is about the habituation of virtuous practices, stemming from an intrinsic desire to do what is right. And here, the world needs good role models. So let religious leaders step up to the plate! Let us lead by example! Think of the positive message it would send for people of faith to not only preach sustainability but to live sustainable lives! For example, think of the positive message it would send for churches, mosques, synagogues, and temples all over the world to become carbon neutral.

At a time like this, the world is looking to faith leaders for guidance. This is why Pope Francis has chosen to issue an encyclical on protecting the environment at this unique moment in time.

## **Conclusion**

Let me end by looking back and looking ahead. The Church is not an expert on science, technology, or economics. We rely on good people like you in this room for that. But the Church is an "expert in humanity" – on the true calling of the human person to act with justice and charity. It is for this reason that the Church reads the "signs of the times" at key moments in history.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Church expressed deep concern for injustices that arose from industrialization, with a vast chasm emerging between the privileged few and the struggling masses.

In the latter half of the last century, she turned her attention to the thorny challenge of global development, and to the grave threat posed by the accumulation of nuclear weapons during the Cold War.

And now, the Church must speak forcefully on the great challenge of our time – the challenge of sustainable development. As the title of Jeffrey Sachs's new book – copies of which are here today – says, we are living in the age of sustainable development, and it is up to all of us to make the right choices, the moral choices.

This September, Pope Francis will address the United Nations on the sustainable development goals. Fifty years earlier, Blessed Pope Paul VI addressed the same General Assembly. The problems were different, and yet the orientation of the Church is similar.

Blessed Paul VI concluded his address with these words: "The edifice you are building does not rest on purely material and terrestrial foundations, for in that case it would be a house built on sand. It rests most of all upon consciences. Yes, the time has come for 'conversion,' for personal transformation, for interior renewal."

The Holy Father went on to say: "The appeal to the moral conscience of man has never before been as necessary as it is today, in an age marked by such great human progress. For the danger comes neither from progress nor from science; if these are used well they can, on the contrary, help to solve a great number of the serious problems besetting mankind. The real danger comes from man, who has at his disposal ever more powerful instruments that are as well fitted to bring about ruin as they are to achieve lofty conquests."

In the light of Blessed Paul VI's stirring appeal "to the moral conscience of man," let us adopt the primary virtues of *stewardship* and *solidarity*. Without stewardship, the Earth will be less and less habitable. Without solidarity, greed will wreak ever greater havoc. But with stewardship and solidarity, we are sure to generate greater *sustainability* and greater *security*. We can ever more realistically count on a hospitable planet that provides a nurturing home for every man, woman, and child in every country and in every generation.

To get there, we need that same conversion, that same personal transformation, that same renewal that Blessed Paul VI talked about a half century ago and that Pope Francis encourages so insistently.

Thank you for gathering in this Pontifical Academy to help the Church, all believers, all people of good will, to join together in taking up the challenges.

Thank you very much.