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## ***PROTECTING CREATION, CULTIVATING PEACE: THE TASK AND CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIANS.***

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### ***INTRODUCTION:***

Distinguished Organizers and Participants of this Congress: I greet all of you heartily in the name of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; and on its behalf, I bring you prayerful wishes for a successful Congress.

It gives me great pleasure to be invited to participate in and to address this Congress; and while I regret that other equally important engagements will prevent me from staying till the end of this Congress, I feel deeply humbled by the prospect of having to deal with a subject matter that the Holy Father has just reflect upon at the beginning of the year, in his *News Year Peace Message*, namely, “*if you want to cultivate peace, protect creation*”.

I shall not attempt, therefore, to tread directly in the foot path, traced by the Holy Father. I shall limit myself to making a few observations about “*peace*”, as an expression of our *desired goal*, some of the challenges to the attainment of “*peace*”, which are related with our treatment of “*creation*”, and then offer some random proposals that may help deal with the situation in hand.

### ***PEACE and ITS CULTIVATION:***

A point of view that was expressed at the last synod for Africa held that “*peace is the fruit of justice, and justice is respect for and observance of the demands of relationships in which we stand. Reconciliation is the re-establishment of justice, disregarded and infringed upon.*”

In this sense, *peace* is directly related to *justice*, as its fruit; and it describes how man stands before and treats God, other men and creation. In Christian thinking/theology, after the “*fall of man*”, the character and conduct of man’s relationship with God, other men and creation are damaged beyond man’s ability to repair them. It takes a free and a loving act (grace) of God to initiate a repair of the relationships and a restoration of *peace*. Again, in Christian theology, it is in and through Jesus that God restores man to *just relationships* (*justifies man*) again, enabling him to live at *peace* with God, with men and with creation.

Thus, after the “*fall*”, the experience of *peace* of any kind is ***grace***: a free and an unmerited restoration to wholeness and to communion with God, with man and with creation or man’s world. Understandably, in the post “*fallen*” state of man, the just treatment of God, of man

and of creation, which only engenders (whose fruit is) *peace*, is received as God's grace, recognized as such and lived with.

“*Protecting creation*” refers to this “*just treatment*” of creation; and if it only makes for *peace with creation*, then it is also completely *anthropological*. “*Protecting creation*”: “*treating creation justly*”, is completely the responsibility and the work of man; and it is from here too, that one may describe the very many (man-related) challenges to *protecting creation* = *treating creation justly*. Briefly here, one needs to recognize that the challenges are basically **complex** in character; but among these, one may single out particularly two, namely, challenges which are **existential** and **spiritual** in character, and challenges which are **moral** in character.

### ***The Complex Nature of the Challenge:***

It is certainly an understatement to say that the ecological challenge is a complex one; and this would certainly also not be the first time that such an affirmation is made. The ecological challenge is as complex as it is got a lot of “*trap-doors*”.

The fact that it is a global issue already makes this a particularly difficult challenge to tackle. As a matter of fact, it is a global challenge in more ways than one. First of all in the sense that it affects the whole planet, but also in the sense that environmental policies adopted on a national level, especially in the energy sector, have direct or indirect setbacks over other countries - not to mention the consequences of accidents or the degradation that causes more or less natural calamities, or even the climate changes that have given rise to a new type of refugees- the ‘environmental refugees’- whose number is on a constant increase. It goes without saying that in order to tackle such issues, even the solutions must be sought on a global level, with the difficulties that we are all aware of.

Science and technology also have a great impact on the ecological issue, either on account of the problems that technological development causes directly to the ecological balance (*the eco-system*), or the mind-boggling conflicting scientific data and conclusions of research. A case in point is the development of *eolic energy* and theories about bird migrations. The effect of some of these scientific conflicts is downright scepticism.

The conflict between the fulfilment of the increasing energy needs and requirement of certain groups of nations, on account of their consumerist style of life, and the needs of new emerging economies and nations also adds to the challenge. And there is still a list of interconnected issues that can be considered:

- The food crisis of 2008 was blamed partly on poor harvest, which in turn was blamed on negative climatic conditions in many producer countries and the high cost of energy. But at the same period, there was an expansion in the cultivation of cereals for the development of *bio-energy* and *bi-fuel*.

- Poor agricultural yield and poor prices for agricultural yields also provoked a drift of rural population into towns and cities, with a resulting increased demand of power and an increase in pollution.<sup>1</sup>
- The great stress under which water is now (for, 900 million people are supposed to have no access to potable water) is blamed on climate change. But it is also true that the use of water for purposes of (clean) energy production, as in parts of the Amazon basin, and for irrigation of industrial agricultural products, as in parts of Kenya, does contribute to this aspect of the ecological crisis. Ironically, though, there has been a raging battle around international negotiating tables to have access to potable declared a fundamental human right.<sup>2</sup>
- Bio-technology and genetic engineering make their own impact on the ecological crisis with the on-going debate on genetic manipulation, genetically modified organisms and stem/embryonic cell research. *The book of nature is one and indivisible!*
- The energy needs of certain parts of the world, like China and India, are indeed great; and if, as unconfirmed and unofficial sources have it, 50 miners die every day in coal mines, then ensuring access to energy may also have *human rights* implications.
- And finally comes the issue of the real need for the present rate of economic growth and its use of world resources: how sustainable is this, and what sense of solidarity with future generation and other dependants on the earth does it show? How real is the present political system and its economics aimed at reducing poverty with its unbalanced exploitation of the earth's resources? How well does the pattern of man's use of the resources of the world reflect a sense of *stewardship* and a *care-taker* position of man? At the end of the day, does the ecological crisis not indicate an *anthropological* and *moral*: *man's existence* and his *moral* sense?

It is to these two challenges that we want to turn our attention now.

### ***An Anthropological Challenge, both Existential and Spiritual:***

It was John Paul II who said in *Centesimus Annus*: “*Humankind, which discovers its capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through its own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. People think that they can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to their wills, as though the earth did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which human beings can*

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. Pontificio Consiglio della Giustizia e della Pace, *Nota informativa sulla crisi alimentare*, 2008 ([www.justpeace.it](http://www.justpeace.it)).

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. *Water, an Essential Element for Life and Now a Matter of Greater Urgency*. A Contribution of the Holy See to the 5<sup>th</sup> World Water Forum, Istanbul, March 2009.

*indeed develop, but must not betray. Instead of carrying out one's role as a cooperater with God in the work of creation, a person sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him"* (CA, 37).

*"Man is replacing God"*: these are strong words, very strong words, that relate to the category of sin. The sin is pride, hidden behind some technological projects, so brilliantly sophisticated as to make people neglect to apply all the necessary prudent measures of caution related to its sophistication. There is also the sin of greed, of covetousness, that urge people to save time and materials, at the detriment of human life, in order to obtain the maximum profit through the exploitation of natural resources. Another sin present is that of omission on the part of those who are in a position to grant permits or carry out inspections.

These are sins that stem from that first sin of disobedience to God, whose consequence has been the 'destruction of the original harmony of creation'. In the "Declaration of Venice", John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I wrote: *"If we examine carefully the social and environmental crisis which the world community is facing, we must conclude that we are still betraying the mandate God has given us: to be stewards called to collaborate with God in watching over creation in holiness and wisdom"*.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, only a mind-set that considers the natural environment as a gift, the gift of creation, and not as 'the result of mere chance or of an evolutionary determinism' (CIV, 48) can help man, in the face of the environmental crisis, not to find safety in a pile up of legislations, summits etc, which buttress his sense of being absolute over creation. He should resist the temptation of seizing the forbidden fruit of *malum*<sup>4</sup>, to flee from sin, conscious of the fact that he does not have the "last word"<sup>5</sup>.

Furthermore: the communion between man and creation, in itself subject to corruption (RM, 8, 20). It is a communion in the wake of sin, but also in the process of redemption, when everything will be summed up (recapitulated) in Jesus Christ. In a sense, this eschatological dimension, although it may overwhelm us on one hand; on the other, as it considers and looks at the very handiwork of God, it "is able to liberate us from the excessive weight of

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. *Joint Declaration of Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew I*, Rome – Venice, 10 June, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> G. Salvoldi, "Una Filosofia personale di lavoro", in: *Tra migrazione ed ecologia delle culture*, Milano Franco Angeli, 2010 pg.88.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, Wednesday 26 August, 2009.

responsibilities that sometimes oppress us. It is God who opens and secures a future for us”<sup>6</sup> the future that we are journeying toward as pilgrims.

It is therefore when man’s behaviour is coherent with his being a creature who ‘shares in the light of the divine mind’ (GS, 15), that he exercises dominion over the physical world in a way that is respectful of the relationship between this world and God, in a ‘*divine*’<sup>7</sup> way, for by reason of his intelligence, he occupies a place above all other earthly creatures. It is exactly in this way that, for example, the Benedictine monks, first, and, especially, the Cistercian monks later, in different periods of the Middle Ages, reclaimed some inaccessible land and wild vegetation to the point of rendering them fruitful.

Indeed, by his intelligence, man has been able to achieve scientific and technical results, through which he has extended his dominion over all nature in an amazing way. However, in order in order for him to exercise this power in a correct way, he must now discover the path to *virtue*: the *virtue* of humility, which allows him to recognize the limits of his abilities. The eruption of the volcano in Iceland last April has a lot to teach us in this regard, namely, the recognition of the limits of man’s knowledge and his ability to make good judgment.<sup>8</sup> As for the virtue of prudence, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states that it is, “*the virtue that makes it possible to discern the true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means for achieving it*” (547).

The exercise of the cardinal virtue of prudence safeguards the balance in the relationship between man and nature within creation, and before God. The recent teachings of the Catholic Church have explained this quite firmly by relating *human ecology* with *environmental ecology*.

“Although people are concerned, and rightly so, about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction (cfr. *Centesimus annus*, 38), because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, yet, they make so very little effort to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic “human ecology”*. Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed (cfr. the “*one and inseparable book of nature*”). This concept of *human ecology* has been

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<sup>6</sup> K. Golsher, “Il futuro della terra, responsabilità cristiana”, (*Il Regno-Attualità* ) 10/2001, pg.342.

<sup>7</sup> M. Pfeifer, “What is ecospirituality”, Pastoral Letter, in: *Origins*, vol.24, no.36, pg.607.

<sup>8</sup> *Dichiarazione di Venezia* , op.cit.

repeatedly expressed by Benedict XVI,<sup>9</sup> who in *Caritas in Veritate* refers to it as the point of reference for **environmental ecology**: “*There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when “human ecology” is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature*” (51).

In reality, it is important to transcend this balance in order to regain and strengthen the *covenant between humankind and the environment* – that covenant “*which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying*” (Civ.50) (...as pilgrims). In fact, the story of nature is one and inseparable, both in as far as the environment is concerned, but also with respect to personal, family and social ethics.

### ***Challenges of Moral Character:***

I believe it is right to assert that it is the combination of two factors that strongly constitute in our times the challenge posed by the ecological questions as a moral challenge.

The first factor is the development of science and technology. This development has not only become so sophisticated so as to render the understanding of its processes inaccessible to most people; the great speed with which it develops is also making it harder and harder to foresee its consequences on human life and on the natural environment. This, among other things, creates a widespread sense of fear among normal people who are constantly wondering, and rightly so, about the quality of the food they are eating or about the quality of the air that they are breathing, even if they are questioning much less the threat of nuclear weapons or, paradoxically, the consequences of the interventions of genetic manipulations on the origins of human life.

Speaking about the threat to mankind, created by what man produces especially through the work of his intellect, the encyclical, *Redemptoris Hominis*, offers a description with some particularly frightening tones. In a comment with regard to this description, John Paul II maintains: “*The development of technology and the development of contemporary civilization, which is marked by the ascendancy of technology, demand a proportional development of*

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Messaggio per la Giornata Mondiale della Pace*, 2007; 2008; 2010. Cfr. too, *General Audience of Wednesday*, 26th August, 2009.

*morals and ethics. For the present, this last development seems unfortunately to be always left behind” (RH, 15).*

In fact, thirty years later, humanity has not progressed in this sense. It also has not progressed in terms of an emerging second factor that seems to characterize our age - the wrong sense modern man has, especially in western society, of being “the only author of himself, of his life, and of society” (CIV, 43). In other words, man feels self-sufficient; and not only does he “replace God”, but he does away with Him completely. In this way, in the terminology of faith, he falls into the sin of pride. Moreover, he thinks he owes nothing to anyone, except to himself; and believes he only has rights. But these rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere *licence* (CIV, 43).

In other words, modern man who has set up institutions and governmental instruments from which he demands the acknowledgment and promotion of his individual rights, feels he does not need to account for his own behaviour to anybody. If on the one hand, by becoming the ultimate goal, man demands *accountability* from institutions, on the other hand, he does not feel accountable to anyone. Consequently, individual rights, when they are detached from duties, can ‘run wild’. In fact, they are a falsehood.

Besides the personal rights discussed above, there is also the talk in our recent generations, of the right of having a child, the right to plan the child, the right to have different types of families, the right of technological dominion over nature, up to the most bizarre rights. There is, in all of these, a perverse dynamics at work in the continuous modern demand for more rights, the removal of every limit, and the progressive widening of the scope of man’s action, up to contemplating the idea of man’s self-reproduction. In fact, this dynamic while “closing man in an egotistic self-production, it also prevents him from assuming any duties, without which all rights are sucked into a self-referential spiral which eradicates any meaning”<sup>10</sup>

In a globalised world, and in the field that concerns us, all this is particularly serious. Benedict XVI writes in *Caritas in Veritate*: “*On the one hand, appeals are made to alleged rights, arbitrary and non-essential in nature, accompanied by the demand that they be recognized and promoted by public structures, while, on the other hand, elementary and basic rights remain unacknowledged and are violated in much of the world. A link has often been noted between claims to a “right to excess”, and even to transgression and vice, within affluent societies, and the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary*

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<sup>10</sup> Fontana, S., *Per una Politica dei doveri*, Siena, Cantagalli, 2006, p.12

*health care in areas of the underdeveloped world and on the outskirts of large metropolitan”* (43).

*“In this way, those principles which form the basis for the implementation of that international social justice, that is fundamental for keeping peace, risk being emptied of their meaning. It becomes impossible at this point to put into practice the principle of a universal destination of goods which is essential, for example, for the energy problem. For, the duty of sharing what originally was given to everyone is not perceived. So, while the right to development is solemnly proclaimed, some nations and power groups hoard non-renewable energy resources from poorer nations, and deny them access to existing sources of non-renewable energy, on account of their lack of means to finance research into new alternatives. The stockpiling of natural resources, which in many cases are found in the poor countries themselves, gives rise to exploitation and frequent conflicts between and within nations. These conflicts are often fought on the soil of those same countries, with a heavy toll of death, destruction and further decay”* (CIV, 49).

*“And so, without a culture of duties, even the principle of responsibility that guides the free action of man towards what is good, and suggests freedom as man’s ability to be at the service of the true good, within the context of the universal common good<sup>11</sup>, does not mean anything anymore. What can inter-generational solidarity mean to those people who are insensitive to the obligations of an intra-generational solidarity, since future generations have no way of asking the present ones what use they had made of the resources they had available? Still, the ecological crisis shows the urgency of a solidarity which embraces time and space. It is important to acknowledge that among the causes of the present ecological crisis is the historical responsibility of the industrialized countries. Yet the less developed countries, and emerging countries in particular, are not exempt from their own responsibilities with regard to creation, for the duty of gradually adopting effective environmental measures and policies is incumbent upon all. This would be accomplished more easily”* - continues the Message for World Day of Peace 2010, *“if self-interest played a lesser role in the granting of aid and the sharing of knowledge and cleaner technologies”<sup>12</sup>.*

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, p. 200

<sup>12</sup> Benedict XVI, *Messages for the World Day of Peace* of 2010, no. 8

Even the principle of prevention ends up being compromised by modern man's rejection of any appeal to his obligations. If, on the one hand, the burden of proof that hangs, in situations of insecurity – and nowadays these situations multiply also because of the recurrent contradiction of scientific data – on a person who wants to accomplish an intervention over nature, is carried out without an ethical reference to man's duties, we cannot exclude that the test itself may be altered, especially when personal financial interests are at stake. Besides, if the caution in intervening on nature is such that in order to do it, one must be able to demonstrate the qualities of all the possible consequences of the intervention itself – consequences that, as for anything that is accomplished in future, will always have some degree of uncertainty – one will not respect the duty to 'govern' and 'administer' creation in order to improve human conditions despite the fact that it will be possible.

To sum up, doing away with God, denying Him, distorts the freedom of human beings. As a result, their actions, are no longer within the realm of rights that correspond to duties, of rights underpinned by duties. The result is that human actions inflict harm also to creation in a more or less serious way, which, in some cases, can also turn out to be even disastrous. The fact is that "the protection of creation is not principally a response to an aesthetic need, but much more to a moral need, in as much as nature expresses a plan of love and truth which is prior to us and which comes from God"<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Some Proposals in view of Challenges:***

I find it very useful, talking about creation and human respect for it/respectful use of it, to refer to its character at creation. This is not to refer to the repeated characterization of everything that God created to be **good**. This has been observed in several discourses about creation already.

I would like to refer to the biblical depiction of the state of things before creation as **chaos** (*tohu wa bohu*), and the conversion of this into **cosmos**, *an ordered system*, by the **Word** of God. From this, we may play the game of simple equations: **chaos + word of God = Cosmos**. Conversely, **Cosmos – Word of God = chaos**. This means that when the world/creation is considered an act of God, brought about by God's Word, then it can be maintained as **cosmos**, and ordered system that supports human existence only by God's Word.

Word of God (*dabar / logos*) is always the "self addressing" that establishes a *meaningful relationship*, and a recognition that whatever is addressed is an entity in itself: it has a being, whatever its level and character.

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<sup>13</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps*, 11 January 2010

Now the first product of the “going forth of the Word of God” was to produce “*light*”; and as Pope Benedict XVI has observed, *light*, like *love*, is the first act of God’s creation. “*Light*”, like “*love*”, also guides the treatment of all that God has created.

This random reflection should lead us:

- To reject any ideological consideration of creation and the environmental issue. For, *a correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be manipulated and exploited. At the same time, it must not absolutize nature and place it above the dignity of the human person himself*". So, nature and the land may not be divinized, as in some ecologist movements.<sup>14</sup>
- Exercise great discernment, the fruit of both faith and reason, not simply to espouse a protectionist position of the environment or an ecosystem for its sake. The human person and his wellbeing is what creation and the “*exercise of dominion*” over it must serve.
- To endeavour to make all scientific and technological approaches to dealing with creation respond to man’s exercise of **stewardship** over creation. Technology, indeed, is *an expression of the human spirit*; and as stewards, “*human beings legitimately exercise a responsible stewardship over nature, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in a new way, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world’s population*” (Civ. no 50). It is only expected of them that they are **trustworthy stewards**. (cfr. Heb.3:3-6), making the alliance between them and their environment “*a mirroring of the love of the Creator God*”.
- Finally, to encourage the development of effective national and global/world governing instruments and structures to deal with environmental issues out of a great sense of sense of solidarity with nature and the environment. The case of multinational companies requires some attention, since there is no gainsaying the impact, often negative, that many multinational make on the environment. Disposing of resources far greater than national governments in many developing countries, the activities of multinational can sometimes be controlled by global and world bodies out a sense of solidarity with both the environment and the development of peoples in these nations.

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<sup>14</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine*...., 463.