

Points / Themes

Human and environmental ecology go hand in hand. (General audience, 5th of June 2013)

In the past Pope Francis spoke frequently about the environment and human responsibility, he used homilies, press conferences and messages to express his views. Preparing for the reception and promulgation of the encyclical letter on this topic, it might be useful to re-read his contributions. In order to help doing that, we would like to offer some of his thinking, ordered around five threads easily identified in his words.

First of all, it is important to notice that the Pope does not subscribe to any scientific theory describing the changes, but rather calls for a debate on this.

1. Economic progress, new technologies and the financial system. How they affect human beings and the environment.

The popes have spoken of a human ecology, closely connected with environmental ecology. ÷ The human person is in danger: this much is certain · the human person is in danger today, hence the urgent need for human ecology! (GA, 5th of June 2013)

The peril is grave, because the cause of the problem is not superficial but deeply rooted. It is not merely a question of economics but of ethics and anthropology. The Church has frequently stressed this; and many are saying: yes, it is right, it is true... but the system continues unchanged since what dominates are the dynamics of an economy and a finance that are lacking in ethics. It is no longer man who commands, but money, money, cash commands. And God our Father gave us the task of protecting the earth · not for money, but for ourselves: for men and women. We have this task! (GA, 5th of June 2013)

There are other weak and defenseless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation. I am speaking of creation as a whole. We human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures. Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. Let us not leave in our wake a swath of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations. (EG 215)

But now there is a rather difficult problem, because, up to a certain point, one can speak with some assurance about safeguarding creation and ecology, including human ecology. But there are also scientific hypotheses [to be taken into account], some of them quite solid, others not. In this kind of encyclical, which has to be magisterial, one can only build on solid data, on things that are reliable. If the Pope says that the earth is the centre of the universe, and not the sun, he errs, since he is affirming something that ought to be supported by science, and this will not do. (Press Conference on the plane, on his way back from Korea, 18th of August 2014).

2. The inherent worth and dignity of every being vs the throwaway culture.

Moreover on various occasions Benedict XVI has recalled that this task entrusted to us by God the Creator requires us to grasp the pace and the logic of creation. Instead we are often guided by the pride of dominating, possessing, manipulating and exploiting; we do not preserve the earth, we do not respect it, we do not consider it as a freely-given gift to look after. We are losing our attitude of wonder, of contemplation, of listening to creation and thus we no longer manage to interpret in it what Benedict XVI calls the rhythm of the love-story between God and man. Why does this happen? Why do we think and live horizontally, we have drifted away from God, we no longer read his signs. (GA, 5th of June 2013)

Nevertheless, men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: it is the culture of waste. (GA, 5th of June 2013)

In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule. (EG 56)

I don't know about entirely, but mainly, for the most part, it is human beings who abuse nature, constantly. We have in some sense begun to lord it over nature, sister earth, mother earth. I remember, you have already heard this, what an old farmer once told me: God always forgives, we men and women sometimes forgive, but nature never forgives. If you abuse her, she gives it back to you. I believe that we have overly exploited nature. I believe that man has gone too far. (Press Conference on the plane, on his way to Manila, 15th of January 2015)

3. Possible answers to the problem.

3.1 An open debate with all people of good will.

I ask everyone to reflect on the problem of the loss and waste of food, to identify ways and approaches which, by seriously dealing with this problem, convey solidarity and sharing with the underprivileged. (GA, 5th of June 2013)

I would therefore like us all to make the serious commitment to respect and care for creation, to pay attention to every person, to combat the culture of waste and of throwing out so as to foster a culture of solidarity and encounter. (GA, 5th of June 2013)

The Christian view of creation includes a positive judgement about the legitimacy of interventions on nature if these are meant to be beneficial and are performed responsibly, that is to say, by acknowledging the grammar inscribed in nature and by wisely using resources for the benefit of all, with respect for the beauty, finality and usefulness of every living being and its place in the ecosystem. (Message for the World Day of Peace, 1st of January 2014)

The important thing is that there be a bit of time between the issuing of the encyclical and the meeting in Paris, so that it can make a contribution. The meeting in Peru was nothing great. I was disappointed by the lack of courage; things came to a stop at a certain point. Let's hope that in Paris the delegates will be more courageous and will move forward with this. (Press Conference on the plane, on his way to Manila, 15th of January 2015)

It is a truly pressing duty to use the earth's resources in such a way that all may be free from hunger. (Message for the World Day of Peace, 1st of January 2014)

Thanks be to God, today many, many voices speak out about this: here I would mention my dear brother Bartholomaios, who has preached on this issue for years, for years. I have read many of his writings in preparing this encyclical. (Press Conference on the plane, on his way to Manila, 15th of January 2015)

I believe that dialogue between the religions is important. On this point the other religions have a good approach. Here too there is an agreement that we should have one vision (Press Conference on the plane, on his way to Manila, 15th of January 2015)

3.2 A new way of life.

Nature, in a word, is at our disposition and we are called to exercise a responsible stewardship over it. (Message for the World Day of Peace, 1st of January 2014)

The vocation of being a protector, however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us. It means respecting each of God's creatures and respecting the environment in which we live. It means protecting people, showing loving concern for each and every person, especially children, the elderly, those in need, who are often the last we think about. In the end, everything has been entrusted to our protection, and all of us are responsible for it. Be protectors of God's gifts. Please, I would like to ask all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of goodwill: let us be protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment. Let us not allow omens of destruction and death to accompany the advance of this world! But to be protectors, we also have to keep watch over ourselves! Let us not forget that hatred, envy and pride defile our lives! Being protectors, then, also means keeping watch over our emotions, over our hearts, because they are the seat of good and evil intentions: intentions that build up and tear down! We must not be afraid of goodness or even tenderness! (homily, mass of inauguration, 19th of march 2013).

4. Creator and Creature: the bible and tradition of the Church.

When we talk about the environment, about creation, my thoughts go to the first pages of the Bible, to the Book of Genesis, where it says that God puts men and women on the earth to till it and keep it (cf. 2:15). And these questions occur to me: What does cultivating and preserving the earth mean? Are we truly cultivating and caring for creation? Or are we

exploiting and neglecting it? ÷ Cultivating and caring for creation is an instruction of God which he gave not only at the beginning of history, but has also given to each one of us; it is part of his plan; it means making the world increase with responsibility, transforming it so that it may be a garden, an inhabitable place for us all. (GA, 5th of June 2013)

Small yet strong in the love of God, like Saint Francis of Assisi, all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples. (EG 216)

God works, continues to work, and we can ask ourselves how we should respond to this creation of God, which is born of love, because he works through love. In the 'first creation' we must respond with the responsibility that the Lord gives us: 'The earth is yours, take it forward; let it grow'. Even for us there is a responsibility to nurture the Earth, to nurture Creation, to keep it and make it grow according to its laws. We are the lords of creation, not its masters. ÷ When we hear that people have meetings about how to preserve creation, we can say: 'No, they are the greens!' No, they are not the greens! This is the Christian! This is 'our response to the' first creation 'of God. And our responsibility. A Christian who does not protect Creation, who does not let it grow, is a Christian who does not care about the work of God, that work that was born from the love of God for us. And this is the first response to the first creation: protect creation, make it grow. (homily, Santa Marta, 9th of February 2015)