

"Our Responsibility for God's Creation"

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The philosophy of nature has always been an interesting part of philosophical thinking. Therefore, in this academic session I would like to consider the mounting crisis of our environment and our own common vocation to care for the earth. It is already some years since Pope John Paul II called us to recognize that this crisis is, at its core, a deeply moral challenge. He wrote: "Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. A new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge.... The ecological crisis is a moral issue." (Pope's Peace Message, January 1, 1990). Increasingly we are aware of the critical ecological devastation, which faces our planetary home.

In industrialized countries there is the smog in the cities, there are the chemicals in the water and in the food. In Africa, we find the loss of valuable wetlands and forests. Everywhere greenhouse gases affect the earth's atmosphere for many years regardless of where they are produced or used. Everywhere radioactive toxic waste lacking adequate disposal sites is around, with still unknown dangerous effects. Yesterday's local newspaper showed a case of rampant soil erosion in this country.

Pope John Paul II recognized ecology as a matter of such importance that he recommended it to the attention of the highest authorities. The Holy Father situated ecology in the context of the opposition between the egoistic desires of the First World and the basic needs of the Third, between the extraordinary advance of technology and the increasing deterioration of the human environment. He recommended, as a matter of urgency, attention to it, both at the international and local levels. Let us try to respond to his call, at least partly, at this academic celebration.

We use the word 'nature' in everyday language, but this word has taken on so many different meanings, as the dictionaries indicate, that it seems better to avoid it in a scientific context. The term 'ecology' is in use since 1866. It refers to the study of the milieu in which living beings live and reproduce. The Greek word suggests even today a house common to all. The word 'environment' adds a human dimension to the idea. It brings out the particular interaction of the human being with his/her habitat defined as the life-sustaining surroundings that are given to people, and that are partially the result of their labour, more or less intended, and of centuries of human enterprise.

A Sparkling Blue and White Jewel

Generally speaking, our habitat is composed of our planet with the biosphere that surrounds it. The astronauts describe our planet in terms that sound mystical: "Suddenly from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow motion - moments of immense majesty -, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly whirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pear in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize that this is Earth". For us who have not had the privilege of contemplating this scene, we need to become aware that our planet can be beautiful from far or near. However, we need to learn that this earth is a fragile and finite world, where the resources and available energy are found in limited quantities, quantities which are sufficient for everyone if distributed fairly and used carefully, but not infinite, not exploitable without limit.

We may become ecstatic in contemplating our habitat, the planet. We must recognize, however, that it is a small spacecraft moving in its own enclosed space on which the crew, that is humanity, must exercise a strict management if it wants to survive. In its study of the relations between humanity and its environment, ecology indicates the boundaries, which the management must respect. Or else the end of the world would be in sight.

The Birds Still Sing the Day after an Atomic Explosion

The relations between humanity and its environment have always been characterized by 'plundering and competition.' The human being found in the environment an ally and a friend, which could yet be frighteningly hostile. From the beginning, humanity has tried to control the environment. It dominates it, and yet is made to suffer by it. Everywhere in the Bible, you find hymns and canticles to the earth, expressing both joy and despair. The apparent indifference of the environment to human suffering has always been a cause of bewilderment. The trees mutely observe the passing generations and the birds still sing on the day after an atomic explosion.

Gradually, an ecological problem has developed in the relations between humanity and its environment. The philosophical approach of Rene Descartes and Francis Bacon opened the way to impressive scientific and technological progress aimed at mastering life, taming nature and reaping huge profits by aggressively seeking unchallenged supremacy over the environment. In the process, people forget that the human person 'is dust and must return to dust,' that he/she is an integral part of the biosphere and therefore subject to its binding laws.

He who does not respect nature will be punished by it

Instead of ensuring a vibrant equilibrium, the industrial revolution and powerful economic interests have promoted a savage exploitation of the environment aided by an ever-advancing technology. Our life-sustaining surroundings, both micro- and macro-cosmic, are limited and to a large extent unrenewable.

Over-indulgence in the use of these resources risks, over the long term, causing damage to the biosphere, which is necessary for the life and survival of humanity. The ancient law stated by Antoine de Lavoisier is still valid: "He who does not respect nature will be punished by it. He who does not respect the environment will suffer the inevitable consequences".

Ecology promotes scientific study of the interaction, sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful, between humanity and its environment in the hope that awareness of ecological dangers will challenge us and arouse our sense of responsibility towards future generations whose resources we are presently squandering. We must recognize that this responsibility is not universally respected. Nations do not yet act in universal solidarity. At the international conferences on the environment such as those held at Rio de Janeiro and Kyoto, the major powers were not prepared to make the necessary decisions, which admittedly would have involved high costs, to cope with our ecological problems. Philosophical reflection must deal with ecological ethics. Whereas a certain concept of human reality has destabilized the healthy relations between humanity and its environment, a better appreciation in philosophy of these relations could be conducive towards re-establishing the correct balance and promoting the equitable use of resources within the human family, now and in the future.

Fatalistic Attitude

What are some of the responses to the ecological situation? First, there is the fatalistic attitude that has long found expression in the French proverb 'After me, the deluge!' This expresses the belief that ecological disasters are completely beyond our control and often escape our understanding. It is easy to arouse a state of panic about the year 2000 through a science fiction ecology that appeals to minds unaccustomed to a critical approach to science. If the immense Sahara Desert continues to spread in North Africa, if the tropical forest of the Congo basin continues to regress ever more rapidly because of commercial greed with its heavy consequences for West Africa, if the hole in the ozone's layer of the stratosphere spreads so as to affect South Africa who can foresee or prevent the results?

The problem is more an ethical than a technical one. Ecology invites us to face that part of global responsibility, which everyone bears due to his/her participation, to whatever degree, in social and economic life. Even though scientific proof is still lacking, an awareness of the consequences of atmospheric pollution by the chemicals that are released into the air must be promoted. Governments are strongly urged to enforce corrective measures

against the main culprits such as energy producers, transport systems and urban developers, so as to avert final catastrophes.

Another expression of a fatalistic attitude to the ecological problem is the tendency to make it the sole responsibility of the experts. It is sufficiently evident that the people in power do not really intend to act even if the scientific world could provide the solutions. It is clear that the specialists in ecology have already found, or will find in the near future, solutions for the ecological problems. However, the problem is more an ethical than a technical one. As in so many other fields, humankind can solve problems, but is not willing to do so. To avoid this suicidal trend, our extraordinary scientific and technical progress must be combined with a growing sense of personal responsibility and of solidarity of all with all. Progress is not to be condemned but it must be protected against its tendency to move in a direction harmful to humanity.

Return to Nature's Attitude

A different response to the ecological menace caused by unrestrained technology has appeared in the form of a radical movement that can be defined as 'Return to Nature.' This thinking, closely related to what is called deep ecology, expresses the conviction that an environment free of any human presence, which is perceived as the cause of any disorder, is the ideal. Humans cannot avoid abuse, manipulation and modification of the environment. Thereby they destroy what would be useful, even necessary, to the future, especially since, in their egoism, they are only concerned with the present and their immediate needs. This nostalgia for a pre-technical existence, a turning away from the modern to the agrarian age, reveals itself in the promotion of tourism of the open spaces and in political programmes such as those promoted by the 'greens' and the 'friends of the earth.' This political activity can create awareness of the ecological problem arising from the excesses of technology, but in the process, it renders ecology less credible. We must also recognize the paradox of modern man abandoning the countryside to settle in over-populated city slums, thus making the problem worse.

The Canticle of St Francis of Assisi

Among those who support a 'green' spirituality, the Poverello, Francis of Assisi, is seen as the ideal patron saint. His homilies to the birds, his dialogue with a wolf, and especially his well-known Canticle to Creatures have made him in our eyes a defender of the environment.

The Canticle to Brother Sun, written in April-May 1225, probably at Saint Damian, is one of the oldest examples of the Umbrian dialect. The fact is little known, but this makes the translation and interpretation almost impossible because of the different meanings of the preposition 'per' which can mean both 'by' and 'for'. This linguistic problem does not prevent some from reading into it a strong protest against the human domination of the environment. Against the idea that man is the absolute master over creation, Francis, God's

troubadour, it is said, would have maintained that all creatures, including man, are fundamentally equal. 'Sister water, brother fire, sister moon, brother wind' - these terms express the lowering of the human being from his lofty position far above all other creatures to a democratic presence among brothers and sisters, all created by the almighty and loving God.'

This political interpretation is rather out of place in our time. Although some read the Canticle as a protest against man's domination of the environment, proposing a radical equality among all creatures, they overlook its undeniably theocentric structure. No doubt, the text has a strong cosmic quality, which is part, however, of a theocentric structure that descends from the Almighty through the stars and the elements down to the flowers and the grass.

Also, any sociological interpretation must include the thirteenth century notion of chivalry, mostly absent in modern life, but which took for granted the qualities of nobility and generosity, especially in relations with inferiors. Francis keeps a firm grasp on the three aspects of the cosmic hierarchy, never at any moment forgetting one or the other: praise of the Most High, respect for humanity, and admiration for the environment.

To see in this prayer a purely bio-centric declaration is to lose sight of its mystical thrust. Nor must we reduce the canticle to the words of a gentle dreamer. A strong poetic sense of wonder is present, of course. It draws attention to creatures so that due consideration is given them even as they are used. Francis knows that the environment will not be respected if the Creator is not. Thus, his Canticle is not a poetic hymn to the three sets of creatures, sun/moon, air/water, fire/earth, but is a song of praise addressed to God by human beings who proclaim the unique beauty of creation as part of their praise of God.

The Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola

Three centuries later, Saint Ignatius, during his recovery from serious injury in his house at Loyola, read in *The Golden Legend* about the life of the Poverello of Assisi. Much later, in a text called 'Principle and Foundation', which seems more philosophical than spiritual, he dealt with the three-fold relationship of the person to other persons, to the environment (the world) and to God. He did not give it a poetic expression as St. Francis did in his Canticle, but presented it as a guide to life, necessary for any human being to act properly, make choices appropriately, and, indeed, to understand himself fully. These three relationships are, for Ignatius, so closely united that a person cannot find God unless he finds him through the environment and, conversely, that his relationship to the environment will be out of balance unless he also relates to God. When Pierre Teilhard de Chardin reflected on this text, he briefly expressed its content in this way: 'The creature is not a means only but an occasion for saving communion.'

This understanding leads Ignatius to a moral demand: 'From this it follows that we ought to use these things to the extent that they help us toward our

end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it.' Ignatius indicates, in abstract but logical terms, the necessary path to the attainment of human freedom. This is not a canticle, but wisdom drawn from the mystery of creation and its relationship to the Creator, putting forth the concrete conditions for freedom intimately linked to all three sides of the relational triangle. Francis touches our heart with his canticle. 'Praise be my Lord for our mother the earth, which sustains us and keeps us, and yields diverse fruits and flowers of many, colours, and grass.' Ignatius, on his part, expresses the same truths in theological form coming out of his philosophical reflection. Therein lies the effectiveness of his 'Principle and Foundation.' He avoids exclusive attention to any one line of thought: an anthropocentrism independent of God and the environment, a theocentrism that pretends to ignore creatures and all created things, a biocentrism that would ignore the Creator and the call to collaborate with him in relationship with the environment.

Ignatius understands clearly that if God and the human person are not in a proper relationship this will have serious consequences in the biosphere. He invites the retreatant to '...an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures - the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements, the fruits, the birds, fishes and animals - on how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life.' (Spiritual Exercises, 60). In the time of Francis and even of Ignatius, humanity was not in possession of the powerful means, which today threaten the environment. From Ignatius' 'cry of wonder', we move today to a 'cry of horror'. In the words of John Paul II, 'Instead of fulfilling his role of collaborator with God in the work of creation, man acts independently of God and ends up by provoking the revolt of nature, more dominated than governed by him (Centesimus Annus, 37).

The Virtuous man looks after his Beasts

Clearly, it is the denial of the relationship with God that causes the ecological crisis. Instead of being treated with proper respect, the environment is subject to irresponsible and violent repression. 'The virtuous man looks after the lives of his beasts, but the wicked man's heart is ruthless.' (Proverbs, 12:10) By attributing this concern to the virtuous man, Scripture affirms that the human person cannot live a dual relationship only between himself and the environment, but must also include the third party in a well-adjusted hierarchy. Inspired by the first pages of Scripture, both Francis and Ignatius perceive that the human being holds a privileged place in the universe, but that God alone is the Alpha and the Omega. The human person is chosen by God, but has not chosen the environment in which God has placed him.

Still there exists a certain innate connection between the human and his environment, subtly indicated by the name 'Adam', the one who is drawn from the earth '*adamah*', with the responsibility to work and protect it. We must recognize that the author of Genesis uses extraordinary strong verbs to express the pre-eminence of the human being. He must dominate (*kabas*) the

earth and submit it (*radah*) to his will. However powerful these verbs, they do not justify a violent handling of the earth, a destructive hostility producing an ecological crisis. They do underline the majestic authority of the Creator revealed in the act of creation and the real part played by human beings through a sharing in this authority in establishing the intended harmonious relationship between created things. Included in the biblical vision is the revolt of humanity, which by breaking off its relationship with the Creator, causes the present-day crisis. To have dominion over all creation does not imply unrestrained exploitation. We are to treat creation as the Creator would, not from our own selfish consumption but for the good of all creation. We are responsible for ensuring that nature continues to thrive as the Creator intended.

Finding God in all things, not in spite of them Ignatius returns to this three-sided relationship at the end of the Spiritual Exercises. He invites us to consider how God labours and works for us in all creatures on the face of the earth. In the environment, the human person finds the Creator "in all things", and not in spite of created things as if they were hiding him as behind a veil, or even with their help, as if they had only an instrumental value. He is one with them in his relationship with God, which God lovingly established for us in union with our environment.

Our Contribution

Finally and concretely, how can we contribute each in his or her own way to face the ecological crisis? This contribution will, generally speaking, take the form of conscientizing every person about his or her responsibility for the ecological crisis. We must realize that the ecological crisis arises out of faulty thinking. Hence the importance of philosophy. Nearly every subject-matter may include fundamental questions of ecology: the nature of the human person and his/her vocation, the meaning and destiny of all creation, the ways in which we know the created reality and especially the ethics of justice and of responsibility for one another and for future generations.

This continued reflection is not pursued exclusively as an abstract activity. The philosophical study may find a practical use in pastoral work, i.e. in educating youngsters in ecological ethics, based on the seventh commandment as in the universal catechism. It may find practical application in the social field for we are quite aware that the first victims of any ecological imbalance are and always will be the poor who are affected by it. The future NGOs and ecological groups at the local and continental African level will need spiritual and ethical input and know-how, because the protection of our surroundings has to be considered as a human right in the name of the Creator. Community and personal choices are opportunities to show respect and restraint and moderation in the use of limited resources. Each particular choice affecting our life-style may be small and insignificant, and yet be an authentic expression of our awareness, of our sensitivity to the rights and needs of others, especially of future generations.

We are invited to take care of the micro-ecology by looking at the right use of tobacco and alcoholic drink, of cosmetics and of medicine; we need to promote education on ecological issues by considering the protection of our surroundings as a human right; we encourage moderation in the use of limited resources such as energy and water; we must defend the rights of the poor because they suffer the most from the ecological crisis; we must bring to light the ethical values of the communion between people and their environment, and educate young people in these values; we must help the discovery of the aesthetic values of the environment so as to be able to sing with Francis the glory of God and to discern prayerfully with Ignatius the love of God shining through the environment.

Undoubtedly, there is much yet to be discussed and reflected upon, but I think it appropriate that I should end with a prayer:

I pray that in this academic institution
we learn to harmonize
the philosophical tradition,
the benefits of modern science and technology,
and the African wisdom
about the human person, its society and home.
Through the intercession of Our Lady,
Francis and Ignatius,
and the African Saints
we pray that we may be able to see all creation
as seen by our Father and Creator,
by Jesus our Lord and Saviour
and by the Holy Spirit,
source of all love and life.
So that future African generations may also
enjoy the water of the lakes,
the greenery of the forests
and the clean air that is brightened by the rays
of Brother Sun.