

Spiritual and ethical dimensions in dealing with climate change

Stewardship of creation in response to climate change

Theological reflections on climate change are urgently needed to identify the vocation of the creation given by God to man, and also the rightful command to work the ground from which he had been taken (Genesis 3:23).

Today, on contemplating our skies and lands, we should heighten our sensitivity to discover the signs that impel our cooperation as religious communities. Rather than stifling us, may our discussions foster the emergence of a common pool of creative responses, committed actions and fraternal solidarity to deal with climate change.

The din of the machinery of development, economic mirages and the vertiginous torrents of consumerism, should not sidetrack our capacity to hear and pay attention to the cries and groans of pain of creation; this chorus of lamentations also includes the voice of humanity.

We're facing an ethical and moral crisis, as care for the environment fades away when no one deems themselves responsible for it. The earth belongs both to everyone and no one. It has no outright owner and this makes us believe that any problems must be solved by other people. This individualistic mindset means that as long as no direct effects are strongly felt, no shared responsibility is accepted.

We see how extreme poverty and obstinate inequality mark the outcome of negotiations that follow the inertia of putting the particular interests of a minority before the needs of developing communities. Moreover, the poverty that is already dire amongst our peoples is even more oppressive when it comes on top of emergencies caused by climatic conditions.

In addition to widely studied mitigation measures – from the standpoint of our religions, beliefs and expressions of faith – we may be able to contribute towards reducing emissions of human selfishness to zero. We appeal to the hearts and courage of all men and women – especially those who are part of governments and draw up economic policies – for a shift towards a more humane mentality and attitudes, so that when they decide on and implement their policies they take into account the life of humanity and the planet.

We want a sustainable future for everyone, including our peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Oceania.

Our faith in the witness of the early Christian communities gives us an example of putting into practice actions that prevented anyone from being in need. Our own Lord Jesus Christ warns us about the judgment we will face and the evidence for our defence is in our own hands today. This is connected with what we do – or fail to do – for those who go hungry and thirsty, the homeless, those without clothes and the destitute, and those who are sick or in prison (Cf. Matthew 25:31-

46). Any attention given to these excluded and deprived brothers and sisters is true attention to the King and Lord Himself.

This is how our spirituality should transform our actions.

This is spirituality in the style of Jesus, as described in the figure he embodies in the Parable of the Good Samaritan who doesn't avoid someone who has fallen victim to a hostile environment, been thrown down by the wayside, wounded and stripped of his possessions. Rather he approaches him without hesitation and does everything he can to help, and even goes back and gives him additional support until he has recovered and is back on his feet again.

Likewise, this is the spirituality that converts our hearts and minds to love the gift of creation and come to its rescue, bearing in mind that humanity is also part of this work of God. For these reasons, the stewardship of creation is closely connected with endeavours regarding peace, ethics, education and development.

It's important to take into account the Message of his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace on 1 January 2010, with the theme *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*. The Pope points out the great importance of the "created", given that "creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God's works", and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind. [...] For this reason, it is imperative that mankind renew and strengthen 'that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying'" (No. 1).

According to the Pope, "the ecological crisis offers an historic opportunity to develop a common plan of action aimed at orienting the model of global development towards greater respect for creation and for an integral human development inspired by the values proper to charity in truth. I would advocate the adoption of a model of development based on the centrality of the human person, on the promotion and sharing of the common good, on responsibility, on a realisation of our need for a changed lifestyle, and on prudence, the virtue which tells us what needs to be done today in view of what might happen tomorrow." (No. 9).

In responding to climate change it's not the fear of feelings of fatalism that paralyses us or impels us to act, but rather a deep respect for the dignity of the human person and love for all Creation. We are tattooed on the heart of God, and his Fatherly tenderness does not forsake us (Psalms 21:10; Isaiah 49:15). If He does not forget the birds of the air, as well as feeding them and clothing the lilies of the field, He is even more likely to look after us as we were made in His own image and likeness. Our confidence in the divine providence that firmly and gently governs the universe is connected with the responsibility to strive to build the Kingdom of God now, with justice, peace and love.

In Latin America this theme was reflected on during the opening speech of the Latin American Episcopal Conference held in Puebla in 1979. Pope John Paul II spoke to us about the "inversion of

values as the root of many evils...,” including “consumerism with its reckless ambition to have ever more, which is suffocating modern man and cutting us off from the evangelical virtues of unselfishness and austerity...”

In a document bearing the same name (Puebla, 1979) the Bishops clearly noted the concern regarding damage to the environment:

“If current trends remain unchanged, the relationship between mankind and nature will continue to deteriorate due to the irrational exploitation of its resources and environmental pollution, entailing an increase in serious damage to mankind and ecological equilibrium” (No. 139).

Later on (No. 327), the Bishops reiterate that the domination, use and transformation of the resources of the earth, culture, science and technology should be fairly and fraternally conducted under mankind's stewardship of the world, taking respect for the environment into account.

They return to the theme (No. 1236) to plead for conservation of the natural resources created by God for all of mankind, so as to be able to hand them down as an enriching heritage to future generations. The latter was also dealt with by Pope Benedict in his Message for the World Day of Peace (No. 8) on 1 January 2010: “Universal solidarity represents a benefit as well as a duty. This is a responsibility that present generations have towards those of the future, a responsibility that also concerns individual States and the international community”.

What has happened in Mexico since Cancún

In the aftermath of COP16¹ held last December (2010) in Cancún, México, we acknowledge that great efforts were made, but we're still waiting for serious commitments to be signed, and the abandonment of weak-willed lukewarm strategic planning in favour of actions that can reverse the damage done to our living space. Weak, unsustainable and merely palliative responses will no longer do, and steps towards real climate justice are required.

The Mexican Church has been working on this issue for several years via Social Pastoral – Caritas. Undoubtedly, taking part in COP16 helped to raise awareness of dealing with emergencies; promoting the parish as a community of communities in coordinating the stewardship of creation; providing inputs for catechesis; opening up spaces for reflection with government authorities, universities and civil society organisations; and promoting research into poverty, inequality and climate change culminating in a printed publication. It participated jointly with Central American Caritas on community management to reduce the risk of disasters and provide strategic responses to climate change.

¹ COP16/CMP6 is the 16th edition of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the 6th Conference of the Parties serving as a Meeting to the Parties of the Kyoto Protocol.

Climate change scenarios

We're living through the first act of a play that we ourselves are writing. In Latin America and the Caribbean, the adverse climatic phenomena projected by climate change scenarios regard extreme events including droughts and more frequent and intense rainstorms. Current climate models are still unable to accurately forecast when and where they will occur.

We hear the voices of indigenous and country people: The Earth is confused. We expect one thing, and something else happens. One day the heavens rain down on us, and the next we're freezing cold or boiling hot. We're suffering with the Earth and we're sorry to abandon her in her agony, as it's more difficult for her to bear fruit and we have to look for food elsewhere.

In our region that includes Mexico and the Central American countries, separate calls for solidarity in the event of an emergency have blended together in a community of countries. Scenarios include increased vulnerability and extreme events; deforestation and ecosystem loss; scarcity of water resources, drought, heat waves and cold snaps; accumulated damage to human health; impacts on the life and culture of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities; severe damage to infrastructure; and increases in poverty, inequality and unemployment. In our countries, the traumatising experience of forced migration due to poverty will be exacerbated by displacement of people arising from climate change. Peace in our countries will be further perturbed on top of other factors that already threaten it.

Regarding food insecurity arising from low agricultural productivity, we are seeing that climate change will alter food production and consumption patterns, and types of nutrition will also be modified. In this context, we believe the term food security used as a basic principle of poverty eradication should be superseded. Ensuring that everyone has enough to eat by no means enables eradication of the state of poverty and achievement of the vital food sovereignty that should be freed from speculation, monopoly, dependence and other forms of domination. We want land to be back in the hands of peasant farmers, and we should learn to treat it – as well as them – with respect and in a spirit of collaboration.

The Mexican population is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate. At the moment, 70 per cent of the country is suffering from drought, especially in the north, while in the south frequent heavy rainfall has resulted in disasters and crop losses, with many families and communities losing everything, which has put their lives at risk.

One of our proposals is to endeavour to change our habits and lifestyles. It's time to pass from words to deeds that bear witness to a heartfelt need for change. We have to change our individual and collective consumption patterns, and use alternative and renewable sources of energy. We must turn our homes, workplaces, offices and parishes into common spaces of transit, training and coexistence, places where stewardship of the environment is respected and secured.

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