



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH**

Monday, 24 March 1997

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. I address a cordial welcome to you all, sponsors, organizers and participants in the convention on the theme: "*The Environment and Health*", to which the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart has offered hospitality and scientific collaboration. In particular I thank Mr Sergio Giannotti for describing to me this important initiative.

Ecology, which arose as a name and a cultural message more than a century ago, very soon caught the attention of experts and is demanding ever greater interdisciplinary efforts from biologists, physicians, economists, philosophers and politicians. It takes the form of a study of the relationship between living organisms and their environment, and especially between man and his surroundings. In fact, the environment, animate and inanimate, has *a decisive influence on man's health*, the topic on which you are concentrating during this convention.

2. The relationship between man and the environment has marked the various phases of human civilization, starting with primitive culture: in the agricultural, industrial and technological phases. The modern era has witnessed man's growing capacity for transformative intervention.

The aspect of the conquest and exploitation of resources has become predominant and invasive, and today it has even reached the point of threatening the environment's hospitable aspect: *the environment as "resource" risks threatening the environment as "home"*. Because of the powerful means of transformation offered by technological civilization, it sometimes seems that the balance between man and the environment has reached a critical point.

3. In ancient times, man showed ambivalent and alternating sentiments towards the environment in which he lived: admiration and reverence, or fear of an apparently threatening world.

To the idea of the cosmos biblical *Revelation* has brought the illuminating and peaceful message of *creation*, from which it follows that worldly realities are good because they were willed by God for love of man.

At the same time, *biblical anthropology* has considered man, created in God's image and likeness, as a creature who can transcend worldly reality by virtue of his spirituality, and therefore, as a responsible custodian of the environment in which he has been placed to live. The Creator offers it to him as both a *home* and a *resource*.

4. The consequence of this doctrine is quite clear: *it is the relationship man has with God that determines his relationship with his fellows and with his environment*. This is why Christian culture has always recognized the creatures that surround man as also gifts of God to be nurtured and safeguarded with a sense of gratitude to the Creator. *Benedictine and Franciscan spirituality* in particular has witnessed to this sort of kinship of man with his creaturely environment, fostering in him an attitude of respect for every reality of the surrounding world.

In the *secularized modern age* we are seeing the emergence of a twofold temptation: a concept of knowledge no longer understood as wisdom and contemplation, but as power over nature, which is consequently regarded as an object to be conquered. The other temptation is the unbridled exploitation of resources under the urge of unlimited profit-seeking, according to the capitalistic mentality typical of modern societies.

Thus the environment has often fallen prey to the interests of a few strong industrial groups, to the detriment of humanity as a whole, with the ensuing damage to the balance of the ecosystem, the health of the inhabitants and of future generations to come.

5. Today we often witness the taking of *opposite and exaggerated positions*: on the one hand, in the name of the exhaustibility and insufficiency of environmental resources, demands are made to limit the birth rate, especially among the poor and developing peoples. On the other, in the name of an idea inspired by egocentrism and biocentrism it is being proposed that the ontological and axiological difference between men and other living beings be eliminated, since the biosphere is considered a biotic unity of indifferenced value. Thus *man's superior responsibility* can be eliminated in favour of an egalitarian consideration of the "dignity" of all living beings.

But the balance of the ecosystem and the defence of the healthiness of the environment really need *human responsibility* and a responsibility that must be open *to new forms of solidarity*. An open and comprehensive solidarity with all men and all peoples is essential, founded on respect for life and the promotion of sufficient resources for *the poorest and for future generations*.

If humanity today succeeds in *combining the new scientific capacities with a strong ethical dimension*, it will certainly be able to promote the environment as a *home* and a *resource* for man and for all men, and will be able to eliminate the causes of pollution and to guarantee adequate conditions of hygiene and health for small groups as well as for vast human settlements.

Technology that pollutes can also cleanse, production which amasses can also distribute justly, on condition that the ethic of respect for life and human dignity, for the rights of today's generations and those to come prevails.

6. This requires firm points of reference and inspiration: a clear knowledge of *creation* as a work of God's provident wisdom and the awareness of *human dignity and responsibility* in the plan of creation.

It is by looking at the face of God that man can brighten the face of the earth and ensure environmental hospitality for man today and tomorrow.

I already recalled in my [Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace](#) that "the most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of *respect for life* evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution" (n. 7; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 18-26 December 1989, p. 2).

The defence of life and the consequent promotion of health, especially among very poor and developing peoples, will be simultaneously *the measure and the basic criterion of the ecological horizon* at both the regional and world level.

In your endeavour to preserve the healthiness of the environment, may the Lord enlighten and assist you. I commend your efforts to his bounty as our Father, rich in love for each one of his creatures, and I bless you all in his name.

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