



The Holy See

*Message of His Holiness Paul VI
to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General
of the Conference on the Environment**

On the occasion of the opening of the United Nations Conference on the Environment, Which you have prepared zealously and competently, we would like to tell you and all participants Of the interest with which we follow this great enterprise. The care of preserving and improving the natural environment, like the noble ambition of stimulating a first gesture of world cooperation in his field, so precious for everyone, meets needs that are deeply felt among the men of our times.

Today, indeed, there is a growing awareness that man and his environment are more inseparable than ever. The environment essentially conditions man's life and development, while man, in his turn, perfects and ennobles his environment through his presence, work and contemplation. But human creativeness will yield true and lasting benefits only to the extent to which man respects the laws that govern the vital impulse and nature's capacity for regeneration. Both are united, therefore, and share a common temporal future. So man is warned of the necessity of replacing the unchecked advance of material progress, often blind and turbulent, with new-found respect for the biosphere of his global domain, which, to quote the fine motto of the Conference, has become "one Earth", to quote the fine motto of the Conference.

The shortening of distance by the advances in communications; the establishment of ever closer bonds among peoples through economic development; the growing subservience of the forces of nature to science and technology; the multiplication of human relations beyond the barriers of nationalities and races are so many factors of interdependence – for better or for worse – for the hope of safety, or the risk of disaster. An abuse, a deterioration in one part of the world has repercussions in other places and can spoil the quality of other people's lives, often unbeknownst to them and through no fault of their own. Man now knows with absolute certainty that scientific and technical progress, despite its promising aspects for the advancement of all peoples, bears within it, like every human work, a heavy measure of ambivalence, for good and for evil.

In the first place intelligence can apply its discoveries as means of destruction, as in the case of atomic, chemical and bacteriological arms and so many other instruments of war, large and small, for which moral conscience can feel only horror. But how can we ignore the imbalances caused in the biosphere by the disorderly exploitation of the physical reserves of the planet, even for the purpose of producing something useful, such as the wasting of natural resources that cannot be renewed; pollution of the earth, water, air and space, with the resulting assaults on vegetable and animal life? All that contributes to the impoverishment and deterioration of man's environment to the extent, it is said, of threatening his own survival. Finally, our generation must energetically accept the challenge of going beyond partial and immediate goals in order to prepare a hospitable earth for future generations.

Interdependence must now be met by joint responsibility; common destiny by solidarity. This will not be done by resorting to facile solutions. Just as the demographic problem is not solved by unduly limiting access to life, so the problem of the environment cannot be tackled with technical measures alone. The latter are indispensable, it is true, and your Conference will have to study them and propose means to rectify the situation. It is only too clear, for example, that industry being one of the main causes of pollution, it is absolutely necessary for the industrial operators to perfect their methods and find the means, as far as possible without harming production, to reduce, if not eliminate completely, the causes of pollution. In this task of purification it is clear, too, that chemical research workers will play an important role, and that great hope is placed in their professional capacities.

But all technical measures would remain ineffectual if they were not accompanied by an awareness of the necessity for a radical change in mentality. All are called to clear-sightedness and courage. Will our civilization, tempted to increase its marvellous achievements by despotic domination of the human environment, discover in time the way to control its material growth, to use the earth's food with wise moderation, and to cultivate real poverty of spirit in order to carry out urgent and indispensable reconversions? We would like to think so, for the very excesses of progress lead men, and significantly the young, to recognize that their power over nature must be exercised in accordance with ethical demands. The saturation caused in some people by a life that is too easy and the growing awareness in a large number of the solidarity that links mankind, thus contribute to restoring the respectful attitude on which man's relationship with his environment is essentially based. How can we fail to recall here the imperishable example of St. Francis of Assisi and to mention the great Christian contemplative Orders, which offer the testimony of an inner harmony achieved in the framework of trusting communion with the rhythms and laws of nature?

"Everything created by God is good," the Apostle St. Paul writes (I Tim. 4:4), echoing the text of Genesis that relates God's satisfaction with each of His works. To rule creation means for the human race not to destroy it but to perfect it; to transform the world not into a chaos no longer fit for habitation, but into a beautiful abode where everything is respected. No one can take possession in an absolute and selfish way of the environment, which is not a *res nullius* –

something not belonging to anyone – but the *res omnium* – the patrimony of mankind. Those in possession of it – men in private or public life – must use it in a way that redounds to the real advantage of everyone. Man is certainly the first and truest treasure of the earth.

For this reason the responsibility of offering everyone the possibility of access to a fair share in the resources, both existing and potential, of our planet must weigh particularly on the conscience of men of goodwill. Development, that is, the complete growth of man, presents itself as the subject, the keystone of your deliberations, in which you will pursue not only ecological equilibrium but also a just balance of prosperity between the centres of the industrialized world and their immense periphery. Want, it has rightly been said, is the worst of pollutions. Is it utopian to hope that the young nations, who at the cost and efforts are constructing a better future for their peoples, seeking to assimilate the positive acquisitions of technical civilization, but rejecting its excesses and deviations, should become the pioneers in the building of a new world, for which the Stockholm Conference is called to give the starting signal? It would be all the more unfair to refuse the young nations the means to do so, in that they have often had to pay a heavy, unjustified price for the degradation and impoverishment of their common biological patrimony. Thus, instead of seeing in the struggle for a better environment the reaction of fear of the rich, they would see in it, to the benefit of everyone, an affirmation of faith and hope in the destiny of the human family gathered round a common project.

It is with these sentiments that we pray to the Almighty to grant to all the participants, together with the abundance of his Blessings, the light of Wisdom and the spirit of brotherly Love for the complete success of their work.

*ORa n.25 p.3.

Paths to Peace p.463-465.