



## Building a New Culture: Central Themes in Recent Church Teaching on the Environment

Episcopal Commission  
for Justice and Peace of the  
Canadian Conference  
of Catholic Bishops

**Brief texts for Parish Bulletins**

Many Catholics today are rightly concerned about the state of our natural environment. In order to assist them, the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) is offering this modest outline of eight central themes found in recent Church teaching on the environment. These reflect on how a Catholic approach to economic questions, social justice, and environmental questions are necessarily viewed in relation to each other. It is hoped that these themes will serve as a guide to discussion, reflection, and decision-making on the very real environmental problems we face today.

To help those who wish to reflect on and discuss the Church's teaching on the environment, the CCCB is making available the following series of nine excerpts for possible publication in weekly diocesan newsletters and/or parish bulletins. The same excerpts could also provide possible themes for homilies. The brief texts are from the central themes and the conclusion of the Commission's document, which is entitled *Building a New Culture: Central Themes in Recent Church Teaching on the Environment*.

## **First central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **1. Human Beings are Creatures Made in God's Image**

Human beings are part of the natural world, yet simultaneously transcend it. There are two key elements here: (1) human beings are creatures, *i.e.*, we are not God. We are therefore not to act with god-like domination over the rest of creation, but rather to recognize that creation comes to us as a gift from our Creator. (2) Unique among creatures, we are created in God's image, and therefore bear an inestimable dignity.

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## **Second central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **2. Creation has an Intrinsic Order**

The created universe is the fruit of the love of God, which has produced human beings in his image who can recognize the intelligent ordering of creation. Because of their privileged position in creation, human beings must recognize their responsibility to be guardians of this creation, and to ensure the proper balance of the ecosystems they depend on.

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## **Third central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **3. "Human Ecology" and its Relationship to Environmental Ecology**

If ecology implies a system of relationships and interactions, then we can say that maintaining a proper ecology of our natural environment is only possible when we foster a truly "human ecology," that is, when we promote human relationships and interactions that respect the dignity of the human person, the common good, and nature. This is because of humanity's unique place in creation. Central to this human ecology is the right to life of every human being, from conception to natural death.

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## **Fourth central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **4. Responsible Stewardship**

Nature has attained its fulfillment in human beings, who have received the task of giving thanks for it and caring for it. This care, identified as "subduing" (Gn 1.28) in the Bible, is not domination but rather "responsible stewardship." As a steward, human beings

recognize that the environment does not belong to them but is a gift entrusted to them which demands responsibility in action. Human beings discern the role granted to them by God by exercising their reflexive intelligence and ethical judgment.

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## **Fifth central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **5. Care for the Environment is a Moral Issue**

Because of the place of human beings in nature, care for the environment is never only an economic or technological issue; it is above all a moral one. Any solutions that attempt to solve environmental problems but are based only on utilitarian factors will not provide authentic solutions. This is because both economic activity and the use of technology are *human* actions and therefore always contain a moral component. The destruction of our environment is due to a neglect of ecology caused by short-term economic interests and the selfish quest for pleasure or profit, and is therefore ultimately caused by a lack of Gospel values.

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## **Sixth central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **6. Solidarity**

Because creation has been entrusted to the human race as a whole and not to any one person, group, or nation, both its resources and the responsibility for its care must be shared by all. This implies solidarity between individuals, peoples, and nations, as well as “intergenerational solidarity,” that is, the preservation of the environment for future generations. Also of key importance is our solidarity with the poor, whose ability to access resources is often limited. Since environmental degradation is often related to poverty, solidarity demands that structural forms of poverty be addressed. It also demands that those who use and exploit resources bear the true costs of this use, which must take into account the environmental repercussions on future generations. In summary, solidarity with respect to the environment is based on the requirements of justice and the common good, which is understood to extend not only between those living, but forward, to those not yet born.

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## **Seventh central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **7. Creation and Spirituality**

The wondrous beauty of creation ought to lead us to recognize within it the artistry of our Creator and to give him praise. The created world is not simply a place to live, or material for our use; it possesses an aesthetic element which can lift our minds to God.

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## **Eighth central theme in recent Church teaching on the environment**

### **8. Responses to Current Environmental Problems**

The Church does not propose or evaluate specific technical solutions to our current environmental problems. Rather, her task is to remind people of the relationship between creation, human beings, and the Creator. Nonetheless, there are certain general principles without which problems cannot be remedied. These include:

- *The Urgent Need for Action:* Actions are needed that can be implemented sooner rather than later.
- *Policy Development:* Policies need to be developed to protect the environment. It is through clear policies that a government protects the common good against selfish interests, whether corporate or individual.
- *International Cooperation:* Nations cannot solve environmental problems alone. The interdependence of ecosystems requires policies that go beyond the borders of states.
- *Financial Responsibility:* The costs of implementing policies should lie primarily with the states who bear responsibility for the problem in the first place and not with those states who are its victims and who represent the poorest populations.
- *Lowering Consumption:* Developed nations must decrease their consumption of goods. Developing nations must take care to use the earth's limited resources wisely.

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**Conclusion of the document by the CCCB Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace, *Building a New Culture: Central Themes in Recent Church Teaching on the Environment***

Often enough, the actions of nations, governments, industries, and other organizations have not respected the proper relationship of human beings to the earth. Yet it is also true that, perhaps equally often, we as individuals have been guilty of not showing proper respect and care for our environment, whether through action or omission. This is why Blessed John Paul II, in a joint statement with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, declared that “a new approach and a new culture are needed, based on the centrality of the human person within creation and inspired by environmentally ethical behavior stemming from our triple relationship to God, to self and to creation.”<sup>1</sup> Each of us is responsible for doing our part to build up this culture, which must be a culture of “life” in every sense of the word. But since this new culture can only develop when we recognize the proper way of relating to God, to ourselves, and to the rest of creation, the eight themes above have been presented to help Catholics in this task of cultural renewal. For it is our duty “to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God's creation, and to bequeath to future generations a world in which they will be able to live.”<sup>2</sup> May the Lord grant to Catholics and to all people of good will the virtue of hope, so that we will not lose heart as we strive to safeguard our environment.

**January 28, 2013**

**Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas**

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II and Bartholomew I, Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (June 10, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI and Bartholomew I, Common Declaration of Benedict XVI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I (November 30, 2006).