

# SUSTAINABLE HUMANITY, SUSTAINABLE NATURE: OUR RESPONSIBILITY

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I would like to thank H.E. Msgr. Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo for his kind invitation to participate in the opening of this outstanding event.

I will speak about ethics in today's world, which is beginning to emerge from the biggest crisis it has ever experienced since 1930.

It is true that there have been times of similar distress between that year and the present – as is the case of the 1970s – but nothing has been as challenging as the current circumstances.

I have said that I will speak of ethics because every great economic or political crisis is coupled with a disruption of principles: societies feel that the ground has been shaken from under their feet, and that they have lost their knowledge of priorities and the very meaning of things. We are living in Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid society", a society governed by relativism as mentioned by Benedict XVI and other bright minds capable of going beyond fanaticism and fundamentalism.

Nowadays man finds himself to be a technical giant and an ethical child. The power of men over the means to their goals is incontestable, both in terms of technological capabilities and with respect to the potentialities of scientific knowledge.

However, this prowess is displayed in a difficult context where the goals may get fuzzy. The capacity of the "**how**" collides with the lack of clarity of the "**for what**", as not everything that is possible is necessarily convenient for man.

The "**we can**" of technology calls for ethical insight on the humanizing "**we must**". In other words, that which is humanizing in man, i.e., everything that allows man's realization as a human person within society and all that builds a society comprised of human persons, is the imperative benchmark for any science that intends to be infused with human nature.

Ethics is about wondering about the human meaningfulness of every activity, and it has an influence on both individuals and society at large. Humanization and "dehumanization" are the two ethical criteria on which lies any action that makes human dignity and solidarity into something real. As well, both criteria serve to denounce any action that goes against such dignity and solidarity.

With the Millennium Development Goals set to expire less than a year from now – and as the UN is considering the launch of a project of a similar nature – there is so much uncertainty about the global economy that, despite the efforts made since the year 2000, many think that the world will be unable to meet the MDG deadline, and new goals are being thought of as we speak.

## **A Natural Project: Ecology And Mankind**

### **1. Man, Technology and Nature**

Built on consumerism and the rapid augmentation of profits, progress in our post-industrial age has led to serious environmental imbalances in the most comprehensive sense of the term: an over-consumption of non-renewable raw materials, noise, visual and air pollution, and the extinction of animal and vegetable species. It has also brought about profound social and economic imbalances: a wealthy Northern Hemisphere where a poverty-stricken Fourth World has emerged, a Southern Hemisphere riddled with deprivation and misery, and forced emigration. In addition, our world is currently the sad witness of energy crises and speculation, of health disorders caused by the overabundance of food in some places and by famine elsewhere, and of old diseases in a new form as a result of antibiotic-resistant microbia.

No doubt man's life on Earth has been riddled with ordeals, which explains his aggressiveness and his drive for domination.

In the face of a difficult and hostile world, more and more sophisticated techniques have been created to domesticate it and make it inhabitable.

But technical advancements have progressed so much that it already seems as if we were living in an artificial world. Thus a sort of “supra-nature” has been created, which has partly helped man, but which has also detached him from Mother Nature. Both History and our current existence show that our “software” – i.e., our ideas and values – has evolved much more slowly than our “hardware”, which has focused for centuries on maximum growth and productivity.

Science dehumanizes itself whenever it takes the path of utilitarian technology: thus technology becomes a strategy for life, as described by Oswald Spengler in his book about the decline of the West.<sup>1</sup> Technology is the de-

<sup>1</sup> Spengler, Oswald. *The Decline of the West*. Ed. Arthur Helps, and Helmut Werner. Trans. Charles F. Atkinson. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. ISBN 0-19-506751-7.

struction of every single myth, a sort of “anti-myth” which is in turn transformed into an ever more irrational and dehumanizing myth, as it subjects everything to unconditional objectification.

When modern technology turns its back on its inherent poetry and creativity and degrades Nature to something that is to be possessed, dominated and manipulated, it becomes “the grave danger”, as Martin Heidegger once warned.<sup>2</sup>

Coupled with rustic, coarse positivism, the dogma of unbridled growth has turned Nature into an object of use and exploitation. When Nature becomes a funfair for technology, and when it is turned into a repository of readily available resources, the vital bond between man and the environment is broken, and an imbalance of unforeseeable ramifications ensues.

Harmony – or the lack of it – between man and Nature will depend on whether man treats Nature from a purely utilitarian standpoint, or whether he interprets it as a space for life that is not to be reduced to a mere instrument or an object of his whim. Nature is neither separate from man, nor against man: rather, it exists **with man**. No sin is more heartless than our blindness to the value of all that surrounds us and our persistence in using it at the wrong time and abusing it at all times.

Only through universal unitedness between men, animals, plants and things will we be able to push aside the conceit of our race – which has come to think of itself as the despotic ruler of Creation – and turn it into the elder brother of all of its fellow creatures.

The environment cannot be solely a space for either peaceful or violent occupation. It must also be the object of great concern, as it is an extension of man himself, who lives on this planet as our hearts live inside our bodies.

Warning voices are currently being heard across all contexts about the grave deterioration of Sister Nature. Some people even talk about “terricide”, the murder of Earth. Nevertheless, it is also true that as with many other dominant issues of our time, people are easily tempted to exaggerate.

Still, it is also true that rivers, oceans, forests, fields, cities, food and the Earth’s atmosphere itself are becoming the victims of the unbridled ambition of not a few men. For this reason we must do everything within our reach to **humanize Nature**, and for Nature, in turn, to **humanize us**. This is a two-way street.

In the face of all this, two critical considerations come up from the standpoint of scientific awareness:

<sup>2</sup> Heidegger M., (1984) “La pregunta por la técnica”, *Ciencia y técnica*, Santiago de Chile, Editorial Universitaria.

1. Man is unable to have any relationship with his natural environment that is not based on plunder. Throughout History, our race has broken the laws of natural equilibrium: thus we have made the water on this planet undrinkable and its air unbreathable, we have polluted the soil to the point of barrenness, and we have implemented unequal and inequitable socio-economic resource management and distribution strategies. This sorry landscape is often known as “environmental crisis”.

Ethical considerations have been present ever since man became aware of his intervention in the world.

The rational use of ethics turns man into both the judge of and the party to his own deeds. More specifically, as soon as the human race grasped the effects of its aggressive behavior towards Nature, it became aware of the need to take corrective action.

2. In the face of the all-too-evident destruction of Nature, the current capitalist system cannot, on account of its very essence, attain sustainable development, as it engenders and feeds on inequity and social injustice, and is based on the unbridled and predatory use of natural resources, the anarchic production of goods and the encouragement of consumption with the goal of obtaining and concentrating profit.

Built on scientific and technological progress, present-day globalization – which has led to a deeper interconnectedness between production, trade and finance – is an engine that has pushed capitalism forward to unprecedented levels, producing serious social and cultural damage. Ushered in by neoliberalism, this novel socioeconomic plight enables and promotes the free play of market forces and fosters productivity, production and consumption, but fails to cater to the needs of society as a whole, which is conducive to increasing pressures on the environment. If this premise is objective, there is no other alternative than to encourage education in such a way as to promote a culture of “sustainability” of Nature. Such a culture should revisit the notion of man as part of the natural world in so many more ways than just biologically, as man is part and parcel of a cultural reality that allows him to comprehend his role in Nature.

## **2. The World, our Home**

For Christians, the world is not inhospitable or prison-like, as pictured in quite a number of mystic and philosophical writings: rather, it is, as described by St. Bonaventure, “the house made for man”.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Cf. G.H. Tavad, *Transiency and Permanence*, St. Bonaventure, N.Y., p. 40 1954.

The concept of “home” always entails a familiar, welcoming and endearing feeling.

If the universe fails to be our abode, it becomes a dreadful place. As stated by Martin Buber, “there is a cosmos for man only when the universe becomes his home”.<sup>4</sup>

For, as Gaston Bachelard beautifully puts it: “in the life of man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a disperse being”.<sup>5</sup>

It is thanks to the house that man best learns to inhabit and deliver himself from the fear of feeling like a stranger. Man is no stranger to the world, nor is he thrown into it, as propounded by some philosophies of existence: rather, he is a being laid down in the warm enclosure of home. This home – something that is dearly ours – must be defended with care and passion.

With its pure and consistent Franciscan ingredients, Christian theology implies an anthropology and is conducive to an ecology, for everything – even matter itself – is good. God has created a marvelous world, and man is not supposed to manipulate it with rustic distrust. “Subdue the earth” does not give us free reign to exploit and destroy the environment: rather, it is a command for men and women to humanize nature by relating to it fruitfully.

I am very fond of the idea propounded by Werner Arber, the current president of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in his speech during the latest Synod on new evangelization: in his view, the duty of scientists today is to discover the possibilities of Nature and copy some of its evolutionary mechanisms so as to preserve it, perfect it or develop it to the extent possible. By thus acting, science would be offering men what God’s Providence has placed in Nature for their sustenance.<sup>6</sup> Deep down this is the same idea as Paul VI’s in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which stated that development – today “sustainable development” – is the new name for peace.

The path that we can propound is that of an education on environmental values that encourages a culture of vitality, healthiness, respect and responsibility, and that builds individuals endowed with a discerning and participative conscience. As long as it is not addressed in this manner, environmental education will do no more than supply knowledge on the natural world, over-

<sup>4</sup> Buber M., *¿Qué es el hombre?*, F.C.E. Mexico 1949.

<sup>5</sup> Judit Uzcátegui Araújo, *El imaginario de la casa en cinco artistas contemporáneas*, Eutelequia, Madrid, p. 15, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Werner Arber, Contemplation on the Relations Between Science and Faith, 12 October 2012, <http://www.casinapioiv.va/content/accademia/en/academicians/ordinary/arber/contemplation.html>

looking one of its principal roles: encouraging a change in perception that may be conducive to the emergence of new values.

Only when our attitudes and behaviors are pivoted on new, revitalized, motivating and harmonizing values will we be closer to many of the solutions that are so badly needed in the environmental arena.

### **3. Man's Attitudes Regarding the World**

Throughout human History man has often changed his way of viewing and dealing with the world. By way of summary, the following points represent the most significant trends:

1. Man is in panic before the natural world: this is translated into fear, terror and adoration.
2. Man is in awe of the world, which leads to feelings of surprise, bewilderment, and admiration.
3. Man is respectful of the mysteries of the world, a place of harmony and beauty due to its being a reflection of the Creator.
4. Man rationalizes the world through mathematization, and as a reflection of the human race.
5. Man feels disillusioned with the world, which has been reduced to a mechanical model, is interpreted from a positivist standpoint and is seen solely from an efficacy perspective.
6. Man dominates and exploits the world as if it were a repository of unlimited resources, which he squanders and exhausts.
7. Man discovers – or rediscovers – the beauty of the world and his relationship with it. The world is our dear abode, and taking care of it or allowing it to deteriorate will both have inevitable repercussions on its dwellers. Caring for the world implies respecting Nature as well as developing it sustainably, that is, in keeping with its actual possibilities. Although this is in stark contrast with viewing the natural world as the object of man's whims, it does not mean that conserving our planet is equal to refraining from developing it.

The current situation contributes to accentuating the differences in the environmental impacts – which vary depending on the lifestyles and the socioeconomic conditions of the developed and the developing worlds – of human activities performed in a globalized planet that pretends to appear free of all boundaries.

Despite their environmentalist discourse, developed countries continue to increase production as well as consumption patterns.

In underdeveloped nations poverty is growing at an unbridled pace, and marginalization, unhealthiness and the lack of food safety are at their utmost, exacerbating pollution and the degradation of natural resources. This is added to the environmental impacts resulting from capital imports from wealthy countries, whose drive to obtain raw materials – by exploiting natural resources and hiring cheap labor – further increases the deterioration of the environment.

#### **4. A Global Issue with a Latin American Sensibility:**

In the Aparecida Document, the Bishops of Latin America have criticized international extractive industries and agribusiness, as well as the growing production of biofuels, especially when it is undertaken at the expense of the food necessary for human survival. I would like to quote a fragment from this Document: *“Financial institutions and transnational companies are becoming stronger to the point that local economies are subordinated, especially weakening the local States, which seem ever more powerless to carry out development projects at the service of their populations, especially when it involves long-term investments with no immediate dividends. International extractive industries and agribusiness often do not respect the economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights of the local populations, and do not assume their responsibilities.*

*Preserving nature is very often subordinated to economic development, with damage to biodiversity, exhaustion of water reserves and other natural resources, air pollution, and climate change. The possibilities and potential problems of producing biofuels should be studied so that the value of human persons and their survival needs prevail. Latin America has the most abundant aquifers on the planet, along with vast extensions of forest lands which are humanity’s lungs. The world thus receives free of charge environmental services, benefits that are not recognized economically. The region is affected by the warming of the earth and climate change caused primarily by the unsustainable way of life of industrialized countries”* (DA, 66).

In a visit to Punta Arenas, Chile, made on April 4, 1987, St. John Paul II urged us not to *“allow our world to become an ever more degraded and degrading land”*.

The final chapter of the Aparecida Document’s conclusions – called Our Peoples and Culture – also proposes a number of actions for attaining a balance between sustainable humanity, protected Nature and man’s rational responsibility for both realities.

For example, in Section 10.4 on new types of areopagus and decision-making centers, the Bishops state that they wish *“...to congratulate and encourage the many disciples and missionaries of Jesus Christ who with their coherent ethical presence, continue to sow the gospel values in the environments where culture is traditionally created and in the new types of areopagus: [...] ecology and protection of nature”* (DA, 491).



This can also be applied to this forum of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences: in the final section of the Document's conclusions, the Bishops speak about the paths of reconciliation and solidarity (Section 10.9) and assert that the culture of peace that should be aspired to (DA, 542) "*flows from sustainable and fair development that respects creation*".

## 5. Conclusion

The future of our habitat, the quality of our food and the wise use of the various sources of energy on Earth depends, of course, on scientists, politicians, philosophers, theologians, sociologists and psychologists: but it also depends on making the daily relationships of the world's inhabitants more humane. Henri Bergson used to say that the swollen body of humanity calls for a supplement of soul, and that the mechanical (i.e., the "swollen body") demands a mystique. Perhaps it might be better to assert that man needs to discover his own spirit, a spirit that rather than a supplement of his soul, is his own self. Only then will he be prepared to inhabit the natural world and furnish the technical world with a supplement of humanity and tenderness.

Man broadens the world's potential and ceaselessly transforms Nature into culture in unison with all the beings on this planet. For this purpose, he needs to perceive, discover and admire the wonders around him. One of the evils of mankind today is color-blindness, an inability to see reality thoroughly. Color-blindness implies seeing things partially, perceiving only some colors and shapes, and judging all of reality, all of life, from a limited and deformed viewpoint.

When we talk about values on a daily basis, we refer to the positive qualities that are attributable to a given individual, or to the importance that we ascribe to something.

Throughout History, the term "value", whose origins go back to Greek and Roman times, has been given different semantic implications. Its Greek meaning from the point of view of axiology is quite noteworthy, as is its Latin definition "be strong, be well".

Building, restoring and fostering the "values" that give shape to our behavior to produce harmonious and peaceful actions is an overall objective in present-day education.

Values education entails conveying concepts that embody, in and of themselves, motivations, intentions, purposes, affiliations, detractions, etc.

A value is much more than a concept stemming from the intellect, as it is capable of affecting man in his totality, i.e., as an intellectual and sensitive being. For this reason, values education is both education in its logic sense



as it must guide judgment-based choices, and education in the realm of feelings and emotions.<sup>7</sup>

Values education that goes beyond formal, bureaucratic pedagogical discourse must be capable of contesting, among other things, the centrality ascribed to “job opportunities”. Education must be targeted on building citizens that are both judicious and committed to the ideals of democracy, justice and respect for one another and the environment.

As Arnold J. Toynbee wrote some years ago, “to keep the biosphere inhabitable for another 2000 years, we and our descendants must forget the example of Pietro Bernardone, the successful wholesale cloth-merchant of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, and his material prosperity, to follow the example of Francis, St. Francis, his son, the greatest of all men that have ever existed in the entire Western World... It is St. Francis’s example that we Westerners should truly imitate...”<sup>8</sup>

This consistent testimonial of sustainable humanity and credible responsibility, and of a natural world that deserves being protected, can become a motto for all those who believe in a better future for mankind and the world, and who commit to working hard to build it.

Education entails boundless responsibility which exceeds the school and society arenas and affects the very existence of the state itself. The future and the survival of the state depend on the quality of the education that it imparts, and this is a matter of spiritual values.<sup>9</sup> For education as a social practice is the means for translating the ideals of society.

In my view, our primary environmental strategy should be environmental education: this is a pressing and ongoing requirement, because through an education on the environment, individuals, societies and states will become aware of the transcendent meaningfulness of the world around us. Education will thus enable us to constructively absorb the skills, the experience, the values and the determination that will prompt us to work to solve both present and future problems in this realm and address them as challenges pertaining to our responsibility for the sustainability of both the environment and mankind.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Barra Ruatta, *Educación en valores: La vida, la escuela, el sentimiento*, in *Educación y valores*. Boiero de De Angelo, M. Río Cuarto. Fundación UNRC, Argentina (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Entre el Maule y el Amazonas*, Emecé, España, pp. 51, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Laurence E., *The origins and growth of Modern education*. Middlesex: Penguin Books (1972).

<sup>10</sup> The core theme of this Conference.

## 6. Food for Thought and Topics for Exchange

- I think that we lost our humility – it is not by chance that the word “humility” should come from the Latin *humus*, which means “earth” – when we deified ourselves as owners of the planet and turned our backs on our role as God’s stewards on Earth. By deeply experiencing creatural humility, we might be able to demythologize the anti-values that dehumanize us and denaturalize society. I have the impression that our societies are becoming – or have already become – dehumanized and denaturalized.
- An attitude of humility implies simplicity and gratitude. More often than not we are more aware of what we lack than of beauty, friendship, the joy of living and the many other gifts that God has to offer to us. Being wise enough to look upon life and the world around us with gratitude is an incentive for living in a state of joyfulness.
- In some ecology-oriented contexts the concern seems to be more about Nature than about man himself: this breaks the equilibrium between mankind and a sustainable natural world.

## 7. Conclusions

Science has helped us to discover a different approach to Nature, one that is fully rooted in our Christian tradition. If we paid more attention to it, we might be able to discern different pathways for solving many of the environmental issues of our time.

This issue is by no means the sole prerogative of Christians: rather, it is a matter that should concern all men from all cultures and religions, because we are all citizens of the same planet. In the face of an anthropogenic reality which has become man’s very trap, the road that remains is that of authentic education. For as long as it is viewed as an integral and integrating process, environmental education will raise awareness among individuals and social groups, and prompt them to embrace their share of responsibilities with respect to restoring the natural order.

Environmental education concerns all human beings, but it also implies considering the diverse components that make up the human race (age, region, culture, socioeconomic circumstances, etc.), as these components will determine what approaches are best for each set of conditions.

The solution to mankind’s sustainability issues is not to be improvised: we must prepare ourselves through education by developing discerning citizens that are committed with the ideals of democracy, justice, and respect for one another and the environment.

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