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I – Human activity and climate change

You could not have chosen a better day to get together and reflect and discuss climate change. Sunshine coupled with the liturgical time of the octave of Easter keep us in a “divine milieu,” as Teilhard de Chardin would put it.

As an aside, whenever I drive upstate New York, I try to stop for a moment at the unassuming and peaceful cemetery in Hyde Park, where Fr. Pierre de Chardin is buried. The very first paper I wrote in my theological studies was on “The Divine Milieu” by this great French Jesuit visionary. Walking now in that graveyard set in unkempt woods and made of many mounds of soil lined up in rows and marked with a white headstone, gives me a powerful sense of that “Christification” of the cosmos he spoke about.

We need to drink deep from these fascinating fountains of knowledge and wisdom in order to face the aggressive and progressive degradation of the environment that has become an inescapable reality.

Let me take the risk of sounding terribly politically incorrect. I prefer to speak of inescapable reality –with a direct reference to factual evidence, to what we can daily observe, ascertain and experience through our own five senses- than speaking of *an inconvenient truth*, as it is fashionable today.

Truth is often used, in this context, as a club to give a cudgeling to those who hold different or diametrically opposed, scientific conclusions. And we do hear respectable scientists and research laboratories come to different conclusions on the same phenomena. Their reports need to be read with a well-informed and critical mind in order to take stock from and raise awareness about this problem.

Beyond all political dust clouds whipped up by the soon-to-be-released report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, there is no doubt that the latest assessments have established a strong link between human activity and climate change.

Climate change, however, is not the only issue at stake when we consider the need to ensure a sustainable environment. There are also the indiscriminate destruction of forests, desertification, water pollution, potable water shortage, depletion of fish stocks, the degradation of global commons like the oceans and landscapes.

Differences on how to address these challenges should not stop agreement on the identification of specific environmental threats and common measures to tackle them.

II – International environmental regulation

International law began to regulate the trade and use of rare species over a hundred years ago, while environmental regulation intensified ever since the first international conference on the subject, in 1972 at Stockholm. Henceforth, natural resources were regarded as “common heritage of mankind”, which delineates the duty to use resources in the interest of the whole of humanity and the duty to explore and use those resources for peaceful purposes only. Here we can trace an important aspect of the difficult and laborious, but steady, development of the concept of sovereignty: from a concept of absolute right of appropriation, to a notion of appropriation and use of natural resources that is responsible and in the interest of the whole of humanity.

A specific body, the United Nations Environmental Program –UNEP- was established to promote advancements in this field. The Rio Conference in 1992 gave an important impetus to the creation of new levels of cooperation among states, key sectors of society and people. In particular, thanks to the contribution of the delegation of the Holy See, it enshrined as its first principle that “human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development”.

The Rio Conference called for new conventions and treaties on biodiversity, climate change, greenhouse emissions and rain forests. The Kyoto Protocol in 1997 covered the topic of greenhouse gas emissions, enhancing the positive effects of the previous Montreal Protocol on aerosol pollutants. In the last twenty years, the United Nations has held conferences on desertification, the environment, sustainable development, population and development and is preparing for a new Conference on the Framework Convention on Climate Change, in Bali, next December. The new Secretary-General of the United Nations is going to make action on climate change one of the top priorities of the Organization.

Unfortunately, the pace of achieving and codifying new consensus at the international level is not always matched by an equally expeditious and effective pace of implementation of the same consensus. In this field, the decision to adopt binding international conventions and treaties is left to the positive reception and good will of each country. What is more, those legal instruments lack proper mechanisms and authority to ensure worldwide accountability and enforcement.

III – Whose fault: homo sapiens/faber or homo ‘insipient’?

When I am asked what kind of contribution is the delegation of the Holy See giving in this particular field at the United Nations, my answer is easy and at the same time cannot be taken for granted. It is easy because our inspiration comes from the social doctrine of the Church, that wealth of social thought, deeply rooted in our basic code – the Bible, as well as in right reason, that the Church has developed over the centuries. I feel comfortable to speak about it here, because we are in the same boat, we share the same inspiration and the same task. It cannot be taken for granted, since the Church’s social doctrine, according to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, is a “*formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church’s tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior*” (41).

In the book of Genesis we read two accounts of the creation of humankind: the first chapter says: “*male and female he created them (...) and God said to them, ‘be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth’*” (1:28). The second account stresses another point: “*The Lord God –it says- took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it*” (2:15). Have dominion over and subdue it, says the first account; till it and keep it, the second.

Certain environmentalists tend to place all the blame for the degradation of the environment on the God of Genesis, because of that order: have dominion over and subdue creation.

Actually, the polemics on religion and ecology was epitomized by L. White Jr., professor at the University of California, in a lecture given in 1966, and published in the journal *Science* (March 1967). He maintained that the Judeo-Christian tradition is responsible for triggering the current ecological crisis, inasmuch as its over-emphasis on anthropocentrism gives humans permission to exploit nature with an attitude of indifference to the integrity of natural objects. In White’s view, the Bible and the subsequent theology would not consider nature a value in itself but exclusively subordinated to the survival of humanity. Hence, the Judeo-Christian tradition would have developed an arrogant and aggressive vision of creation and paved the way for the contemporary environmental crisis.

With lightning-speed, the polemics crossed the Ocean and spread throughout Europe.

For many years the scapegoat of the environmental crisis was the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the solution would have required us to rethink that line of thought and look for a new religion. In our times, the emphasis on human responsibility tends to make the human being the scapegoat, and limiting births and living conditions the solution.

I still have a vivid recollection of my professor of Old Testament who, in 1974, illustrated for us an interesting study by the Jesuit exegete N. Lohfink, who dotted the “i”s of this issue. The priestly text of Genesis 1:28 is not a commandment but a blessing. In this context, the blessing upon the growth of humanity and upon its diversification in ethnic groups implied their settling in different lands, their peaceful coexistence, along with the taming of the animals. The waste of natural resources, the degradation of the environment, technique and arts, are totally foreign to this biblical text. Art and technique are meant to perfect not destroy the cosmos. Furthermore, Lohfink noted that Genesis 1:28 was probably drafted during the Babylonian exile and influenced by a local epic poem focusing on the stability of the world through birth limitations, clearly a Malthusian cosmogony *ante litteram*, for once conceived not by the West but by the Eastern world when confronting prehistoric ecological unbalances.

There is nothing new under the sun!

Certainly Gen. 1:28 motivated and influenced in many ways the emergence of the *homo faber*, that is, “man the maker,” referring to humans as controlling the environment through tools and production.

However, the problem here is not *homo faber*, “man the maker,” without whom we would not enjoy the level of progress and well-being we have attained. Rather, at stake are the inhumane mechanisms that various individuals and societies throughout the centuries adopted in controlling and transforming the environment. They were certainly not inspired by the word of God in the book of Genesis. They just contradicted those words that speak of “tilling and keeping”, that is “taking care of”.

Awhile ago, I gave a brief overview of the works done at the international level in order to set an ever more clear and appropriate environmental regulation. Later we will dwell also on the action taken and still needed at all levels and by different actors. However, we are convinced that the solution does not stem only from technical or economic measures, rather, it encompasses ethical, social and religious values as well. This aspect is vital for us, for Catholic leaders in climate change, energy production, agriculture and labor.

IV – The Church’s social doctrine: “tilling and taking care of”

The social thought of the Catholic Church is developing precisely in the light of this “tilling and taking care of”.

We cannot examine all the documents and developments of Catholic social thought on the environment. However, I would like to mention a couple of corollaries stemming from its principles and attitude.

I like to think of the social thought of the Church as a system of concentric circles. At the very center we have the human being – the human person, and then a first circle – the family; then a second circle – the local community with its different expressions; the third circle is represented by the national level, and finally, the international and global level. The center, the measure, the reference of each circle remains the human person, so much so that the dignity of the human person can be considered the first basic principle of the social doctrine of the Church. The second being the unity of the human family, that is, the various circles intertwined by the categories of interdependence, subsidiarity and solidarity.

IV.a – Human activity part of the problem, part of the solution

The latest IPCC report, not yet published, but its abstract is already known, tells us that human activity is part of the problem. Correct. Though, as I mentioned before, scientists disagree on the extent and

modalities of this human responsibility. There are tangible signs that we see with our eyes, smell with our noses and suffer in our lungs, clouds of greenhouse gases almost everywhere.

However, it's of utmost importance to complete the sentence: if we are part of the problem, we likewise, must be part of the solution.

It is important to hold this statement in its entirety; otherwise, we fall into the trap of apocalyptic fears. Fear, as we well realize when it comes to dealing with the phenomenon of terrorism, distorts reality, overshadows our discernment and plunges our societies into paralysis or leads to rash and disastrous decisions.

It is a current cultural trend to sensationalize problems and issues, but oftentimes this approach ends up in underestimating positive experiments and proposals, unpretentious, though effective.

The approach "to till and take care of" the environment would lead us to reframe the debate on climate change and the environment in general. It is becoming increasingly clear that there is a mutually dependent relationship between environment and economy, between environmental sustainability and development. We will bring it to fruition when we give ecology its proper place and consideration at the same level and in inseparable connection to the economy. Our current economic model depends essentially on the sound condition of the various components of the environment, without which we would have no commodities for production and trade.

It boils down to opting between growth and poverty.

It is important to adhere to this statement in its entirety to grasp and act on the need to recognize the cosmos, the various components of nature, as values in themselves. They have a consistency and a value inasmuch as they contribute to the realization and fulfillment of human beings. However, they are an integral part of the same God's creation. They have to be recognized and respected for their own value and not only for their instrumentality to the human person. In particular, they have their own laws and language which must be learned and respected. Some experts and thinkers in this field maintain that the Catholic social thought has for the most part emphasized theological anthropology and ethics. In order to contribute to overcoming the current ecological crisis, it would need to elaborate a deeper sense of the creation as the mirror of the glory and wisdom of God.

It is certainly not a matter of considering mother nature something sacred or divine, because it remains within the sphere of human action and interpersonal relations. However, theology can contribute to the debate by deepening and enhancing the relationship of creation to God, far from any undue immanentism.

The needed recognition of the cosmos as a value in itself does not diminish the fact that creation takes on its full splendor when, thanks to human relations, becomes *spatium verae fraternitatis*, a place of true brotherhood, as Vatican II put it some forty years ago (*Gaudium et Spes*, 37).

Human activities impact on creation, on the environment – by which I mean here work, art, industry, market, commerce- find their fulfillment in the quality of human relations, whose highest expression is brotherhood, fraternity and friendship. If human beings are made for the realization of mutual communion, creation is the vital space, the house for this communion. With humans absorbed solely in self-fulfillment, creation becomes the scene of their indiscriminate exploitation; with humans open to love, creation becomes the place for the mutual exchange of gifts among people. The ecological issue demands of us a deeper understanding as well as an authentic implementation of the relational identity of human beings.

What we appear to need now is a greater equilibrium in our consideration of the relationship between humanity and the cosmos, instead of simply reversing the rapport and thus undermining humanity's right to life and sacrificing the human being to an unrealistic preservation of the cosmos/environment.

Among those who look at the ecological crisis as a phenomenon of pollution, greenhouse gas emission and climate change, coupled with the degradation and, in the end, exhaustion of the ecosystem, there is an increasing tendency to devise and propose an economic downshifting. A downshift in terms of reduction in natural resource usage and environmental impact. In the States this movement is often expressed in terms of so-called *voluntary simplicity*, that is, a way of life that tends to involve patterns of

working less, wanting less and spending less. In other parts of the world, it focuses on a radical criticism and opposition to the current economic and market systems.

The vocabulary in recent encyclicals and papal messages on the social doctrine of the Church, speaks of ecological conversion and repentance. “*What is required is an act of repentance on our part –says a joint Declaration by John Paul II and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I, in 2002-. A solution on the economic and technological level can only be found if we undergo in the most radical way an inner change of heart which can lead to a change in life-style and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production*”.

The use of moral terminology like repentance and conversion should not lead anyone, much less those who devote themselves to seek and apply technical and legislative solutions, to dismiss the importance of this aspect. After all, the Catholic social doctrine defines common good as “*the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily*” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 164). The notion of “fulfillment” (the Latin speaks of “perfection”) introduces an important factor in the organization of civil society. It is not a mere matter of recognizing and composing rights, duties, interests of groups and individuals according to fair and democratic procedures; nor is it a simple socio-economic well-being, but a matter of tending to a higher role model of society, where the “higher” stands for a link with the transcendent.

I would like to recall here the philosopher-sociologist Max Weber who used to say that human society is always and everywhere composed of two key figures: the kings and the prophets. The kings are those who have to legislate, to make decisions however difficult they may be; the prophets are those who have to remind everyone, including the kings, of those values without which human society would fall part.

In order to change the situation, the social doctrine of the Church does not limit itself to a general criticism of the economic system and philosophies. It places in direct discussion the effective conditions of injustice, unbalance, neglect and exploitation. Within the current economic, market, financial and environmental systems, it aims at identifying the positive and useful instruments that history has constructed, to liberate them from deformities and dismantle those inhumane mechanisms, or ‘structures of sin’, as the encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* calls them, which are the cause of the current crisis.

IV.b – Universal destination of goods and common good

On this point, the social doctrine of the Church rests on a tenet apt to shed a multifaceted light on the real and urgent ecological crisis, without resorting to ideological extremes; that is, the universal destination of goods. “*The universal destination of goods entails obligations on how goods are to be used by their legitimate owners*” (Compendium of the Catholic Church, 178).

This principle spreads into some corollaries that form the pillars of the social doctrine of the Church, namely:

- The right to a safe and decent environment that translate into a concern of governments, international institutions, groups and individuals for social and civil rights, social and material goods.
- Subsidiarity which maintains that “*a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good*” (*Centesimus Annus*, 48). For our specific case, the principle of subsidiarity considered top down, requires governments and international organizations and corporations to provide a solid framework for security and welfare, while keeping them from acting in total disregard of or even against the interests of local societies. But, it works also on a horizontal level and bottom up, whenever civil society, in all its expressions takes initiatives to promote and care for the common good.

- Solidarity, which derives its origin and strength from the nature of human work, and therefore, from the primacy of the human person over things, will create the machinery of the dialogue and cooperation that is needed to tackle the environmental issue.

VI.c – A more detailed Catholic vision for common action

In an effort to outline an ethical framework rooted in Catholic social doctrine for the understanding of and action on the environmental question, thinkers and experts in the field are devising sets of principles that may differ in vocabulary but capture the spirit and letter of the recent Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church.

I would like to mention some of them as food for thought for your day of reflection and debate.

- First of all, we can state that the Church's social doctrine contributes directly to the resolution of the ecological crisis by affirming that the divine communion finds itself 'housed' in the created cosmos. For this reason we can speak of the cosmos as a place of personal communion. (cfr. *International Theological Commission, Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God, in Origins, vol. 34, of 23 September 2004*).
- In this context, the environment, being in many respects a public good, is also a common concern of all humanity. There can be no long-term development without environmental care. Addressing worsening trends of environmental degradation is one of the greatest collective challenges for economic development and human welfare.
- Creation as a place of personal communion reinforces the conviction that all people, by virtue of their common humanity, have a right to a safe and decent environment. The entire world faces risks from climate change. However, while the distribution of risks is equal, the distribution of vulnerability is not. If we do not address the ecological vulnerability of some countries and world regions, it is inevitable that climatic forces will be the major reason for inequalities within and between nations.
- Likewise, the universal destination of goods and distributive justice require of each and every human being common, though differentiated responsibilities towards the environment. Therefore, all humans, rich and poor, have a duty not to cause environmental abuse. A country with inadequate poverty reduction strategies is unlikely to have a good adaptation policy. Furthermore, the world has an infinite supply of carbon dioxide and the atmosphere has a limited capacity to absorb these emissions. The urgency and the means of putting a barrier between the two raises important equity/efficiency concerns. Total equity on one hand, or total efficiency on the other, seem to be untenable without creating or worsening inequalities and injustices. Here is where prudence and sensibility for the common good come into the picture and help to set out a dispassionate way to reconcile both principles.
- Looking at the reasons underlying poverty, observers and experts find more and more that many of these are climate and environmental-related. We need to address the human costs of climate change and environmental degradation in terms of their impact on health, education and access. The increasing incidence of natural disasters with environmental causes call for a need to strengthen the links between environmental and humanitarian activities.
- A sound concern for the environment cannot be separated from a genuine concern for poverty. Appropriate mechanisms for technological transfer and innovation intended to help the poorest communities to contain and overcome environmental degradation is in order.
- This has implications for the multilateral framework. While we already possess an advanced knowledge and understanding of what we need to do both individually and collectively in order to remedy the situation, what is needed now seems to be a more clear and determined environmental governing structure to implement the changes at all levels.
- As demonstrated by the increased variability of rainfall, evaporation and flooding, the primary transmission mechanism of climate change that effects people is water. Thus water management

is a large part of any climate change. The second UN World Water Development Report stated that the principal problem which impedes the fulfillment of water requirements is not the lack of sufficient water for human needs, but that of the governance of water resources, highlighting problems of management, infrastructure, technology, and finances. Governance of water resources must be based on the implementation of the principle of responsibility shared at the international level, with particular attention to the principle of subsidiarity, which requires the participation of local communities in the decision-making process.

- If one looks at many countries today, one of the ways they are responding to concerns over price and availability of energy is to resort to the use of coal. Coal is the most carbon intensive product in use. This has very clear implications for government approaches to climate security. A realistic goal is to understand approaches to energy policy in the context of climate change. It seems certain that fossil fuels are going to be with us for the foreseeable future and states are going to rely on hybrid options in energy mix, as the various national and international reports suggest. If that is the case, then serious public investment in clean technology must accompany this pragmatism as an urgent part of national and international strategies. This should help to diminish as quickly as possible the impact of air and sea transport pollution and those sectors' continued use of outdated technology. Progress is slowly being made in clean technologies in other fields, including automobiles: but the time is now ripe for major investment in cleaner air and sea transport technologies before the ecological balance is tipped by culpable neglect.

- The recent Catholic social thought has emphasized the notion of justice as participation. Through the broadest participation of different stakeholders, the essential principles of solidarity and subsidiarity will be better respected. It is through these two principles that stakeholders will come to perceive that the needs of all, not just some, must always be taken into account. In this context, what is important is to guarantee an appropriate accountability on the part of those directing programmes and projects on sustainable development, so that decisions taken will reflect the concerns of the people that the programmes are meant to help.

From the busy agenda of this day, I see that you are now going to tackle very concrete issues affecting the world and in miniature, your own corner of the world – the State of Ohio. I wish you much wisdom, as well as personal and communal commitment to the cause of safe and healthy environment.