

Church Teaching on Ecology

Pope Paul VI

[Octogesima Adveniens](#)

- “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family” (No. 21).

Saint John Paul II

[Centesimus Annus](#)

- “Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God's gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed” (No. 38).
- “Just as within individual societies it is possible and right to organize a solid economy which will direct the functioning of the market to the common good, so too there is a similar need for adequate interventions on the international level...This may mean making important changes in established life-styles, in order to limit the waste of environmental and human resources, thus enabling every individual and all the peoples of the earth to have a sufficient share of those resources. In addition, the new material and spiritual resources must be utilized which are the result of the work and culture of peoples who today are on the margins of the international community, so as to obtain an overall human enrichment of the family of nations” (No. 52).

[World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990](#)

- “Many ethical values, fundamental to the development of a peaceful society, are particularly relevant to the ecological question. The fact that many challenges facing the world today are interdependent confirms the need for carefully coordinated solutions based on a morally coherent world view. For Christians, such a world view is grounded in religious convictions drawn from Revelation.” (No. 2)
- “When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: ‘Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away’ (Hos 4:3).” (No. 5)
- “We cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations” (No. 6).
- “The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related "greenhouse effect" has now

reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs" (No. 6).

- "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. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man" (No.7)
- "Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a "cosmos" endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity." (No. 8)
- "On the other hand, the earth is ultimately a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, 'God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all peoples' (Gaudium et Spes, 69). This has direct consequences for the problem at hand. It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness - both individual and collective - are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence." (No. 8)

"Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause. As I have already stated, the seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few." (No. 13)

"An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth. This education cannot be rooted in mere sentiment or empty wishes. Its purpose cannot be ideological or political. It must not be based on a rejection of the modern world or a vague desire to return to some 'paradise lost'. Instead, a true education in responsibility entails a genuine conversion in ways of thought and behaviour. Churches and religious bodies, non-governmental and governmental organizations, indeed all members of society, have a precise role to play in such education. The first educator, however, is the family, where the child learns to respect his neighbour and to love nature." (No. 13)

"Finally, the aesthetic value of creation cannot be overlooked. Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity. The Bible speaks again and again of the goodness and beauty of creation, which is called to glorify God (cf. Gen 1:4ff; Ps 8:2; 104:1ff; Wis 13:3-5; Sir 39:16, 33; 43:1, 9). More difficult perhaps, but no less profound, is the contemplation of the works of human ingenuity. Even cities can have a beauty all their own, one that ought to motivate people to care for their

surroundings. Good urban planning is an important part of environmental protection, and respect for the natural contours of the land is an indispensable prerequisite for ecologically sound development. The relationship between a good aesthetic education and the maintenance of a healthy environment cannot be overlooked.” (No. 14)

Pope Benedict XVI

[Caritas in Veritate](#)

- “Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.” (No. 51)
- “The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God’s creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God’s creation.” (No. 48)
- “Nature expresses a design of love and truth. It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be ‘recapitulated’ in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a ‘vocation’. Nature is at our disposal not as ‘a heap of scattered refuse’, but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order ‘to till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15).” (No 48)
- “But it should also be stressed that it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person. This position leads to attitudes of neo-paganism or a new pantheism — human salvation cannot come from nature alone, understood in a purely naturalistic sense. This having been said, it is also necessary to reject the opposite position, which aims at total technical dominion over nature, because the natural environment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation. Today much harm is done to development precisely as a result of these distorted notions.” (No. 48)
- “*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.* This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences. . . . Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society. Nature, especially in our time, is so integrated into the dynamics of society and culture that by now it hardly constitutes an independent variable.” (No. 51)

- “The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature.” (No. 51)
- “If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology.” (No. 51)
- “It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.” (No. 51)

World Day of Peace, January 1, 2010

- “The Church has a responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction” (No. 12).
- “Without entering into the merit of specific technical solutions, the Church is nonetheless concerned, as an ‘expert in humanity’, to call attention to the relationship between the Creator, human beings and the created order.” (No. 4)
- In 1990 John Paul II had spoken of an ‘ecological crisis’ and, in highlighting its primarily ethical character, pointed to the ‘urgent moral need for a new solidarity’. His appeal is all the more pressing today, in the face of signs of a growing crisis which it would be irresponsible not to take seriously. Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of “environmental refugees”...? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources? (No. 4).
- Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. Once man, instead of acting as God’s co-worker, sets himself up in place of God, he ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, ‘which is more tyrannized than governed by

him'. Man thus has a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it." (No. 6)

- "To protect the environment, and to safeguard natural resources and the climate, there is a need to act in accordance with clearly-defined rules... while at the same time taking into due account the solidarity we owe to those living in the poorer areas of our world and to future generations" (No. 7).
- "The ecological problem must be dealt with not only because of the chilling prospects of environmental degradation on the horizon; the real motivation must be the quest for authentic world-wide solidarity inspired by the values of charity, justice and the common good. For that matter, as I have stated elsewhere, 'technology is never merely technology. It reveals man and his aspirations towards development; it expresses the inner tension that impels him gradually to overcome material limitations. Technology in this sense is a response to God's command to till and keep the land (cf. Gen 2:15) that he has entrusted to humanity, and it must serve to reinforce the covenant between human beings and the environment, a covenant that should mirror God's creative love'." (No. 10)

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

[The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#)

- "The ecological question must not be faced solely because of the frightening prospects that environmental destruction represents; rather it must above all become a strong motivation for an authentic solidarity of worldwide dimensions" (No. 486).
- "Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting a common good, destined for all" (No. 466).

U.S. Bishops Statements

[Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching, 1991](#)

- "Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human. Our tradition calls us to protect the life and dignity of the human person, and it is increasingly clear that this task cannot be separated from the care and defense of all of creation."
- "Created things belong not to the few, but to the entire human family."

[Global Climate Change A Plea For Dialogue Prudence And The Common Good, 2001](#)

- "At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. It is about protecting both "the human environment" and the natural environment. It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us."
- "In that spirit of praise and thanksgiving to God for the wonders of creation, we Catholic bishops call for a civil dialogue and prudent and constructive action to protect God's precious gift of the earth's atmosphere with a sense of genuine solidarity and justice for all God's children."