

THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL CARE: A MORAL IMPERATIVE

*Rev. Dr. Remigio P. Mollaneda**

Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportion and reached such alarming and critical level as to be the responsibility of everyone. Its various aspects demonstrated the need for individual as well as concerted efforts aimed at establishing the duties and moral obligations that belong to individuals, peoples and the international community.

According to scientists, diseases transmitted by polluted water kill more than 12 million children worldwide each year (Union of Concerned Scientists, *The Global Environmental Crisis* Cambridge, Mass, December 1994). Pesticides poison farm workers and people living near farms who drink contaminated water, accounting for 20,000 deaths and one million illnesses worldwide each year (WHO, "Public Health Impact of Pesticides Used in Agriculture", 1990, p.86). Tragedies like Bhopal Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Ormoc flash flood, the Alaskan oil spill and the Manila Bay red tide and fishkill remind us of the seriousness and criticalness of the global situation. (Barry Commoner, "Making Peace with the Planet").

In surveying the contemporary literature on ecology and environmental crisis, we observe a growing recognition that protecting and properly using the goods of creation is radically and fundamentally a moral issue.

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro focused international attention on a wide range of environmental issues, but failed to impress on the participants the moral dimension of the issues. Thus, despite the agreement and forward-looking strategies of the Rio Conference, there remains the difficulty of establishing international agreements and policies based on fundamental moral principles.

** Rev. Dr. Remigio P. Mollaneda is the Director of Graduate School of the Visayas State College of Agriculture. He holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Social Sciences and Humanities from the Pontifical Gregorian University of Rome.*

The account of Creation in the Book of Genesis tells us that the creation events are always followed by the refrain: "And God saw that it was good. The goods of the earth"...

The goods of the earth are part of the heritage of the entire human family. They are held in common across national boundaries and continental divides. They belong to the poor and developing nations as well as to the rich and successful. A collective sense of stewardship and worldwide recognition of common needs and the common good will enable us to exercise proper self-restraint in the use of natural resources. This is the direction to look for the true solution to environmental problems, which should be based on a morally coherent world view. The fundamental principles of morality should guide our consideration: integrity of all creation, respect for life and environmental justice.

Integrity of All Creation

The global commons – air, water, the seas, fish, animals, grasslands and rain-forests---which we share collectively but do not own privately are under severe ecological degradation: the vast increase in toxic wastes, from nuclear and other facilities, poisonous residues in foods, resulting from the use of harmful fertilizers and pesticides; the enormous consumption of fossil materials in the throw away, consumer society (e.g. plastics, styrofoam, and metal packages and containers); the waste of water in a world where more than half the people have no access to clean water; the loss of soil because of chemical-intensive agriculture; the waste of energy in poorly designed houses and buildings. Ozone loss, air pollution, and overfishing, soil erosion, and the increasing loss of biodiversity and rainforests threaten the common supports and the very essence of the physical existence of our planet.

The difficulty in protecting the commons is developing national and international mechanisms for sharing the benefits and burdens. The danger is, that in the absence of common responsibility and collective mechanisms for protecting and managing the commons, these resources can be used for gain by the users while ignoring or passing on the cost to others. The overuse or damage of these vital commons not only endangers those of us living today, but also future generations.

"But in most countries today, including our own, it is the poor and the powerless who most directly bear the burden of current environmental carelessness... Too often, the structure of sacrifice involved in environmental remedies seems to exact a high price from the poor and from workers... (they) shoulder much of the weight of economic adjustment. (Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection)".

God's earth has to be reflected in and of itself. The whole of creation came from the hands of God as a harmonious universe or cosmos, a common universal heritage endowed by the Creator with its own integrity, its own internal dynamic balance. This order must be respected, preserved and protected. For when human beings reject the Creator's plan, or recklessly ignore it by destroying the balance of nature, they provoke a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. Despoiled Nature takes its revenge on mankind.

Pope John Paul II stressed that "to damage this creation not only violates morality, but it also insults the Creator; it is a kind of blasphemy". (1990 World Peace Day Message).

RESPECT FOR LIFE

The U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference in the 1991 Message listed what they called "the integral dimensions of ecological responsibility and a God-centered and sacramental view of the universe and a consistent respect for human life as among the issues that "have once and for all entered the centers of theological research and absolutely cannot be separated any longer from pastoral practices". And the Bishops issued the warning that "the constant, commutative destruction of life-forms and different habitats will have, in the long term, the same effect as a nuclear fireball that would render the planet inhospitable to life".

Environmentally, sustainable development is not possible unless poverty is eliminated. Too often, increased productivity overshadows a concern for the workers' safety or long range well-being. And in the Philippines, a libertarian approach to the use of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco endangers health. Add to this, the consumerist mentality and the emphasis on personal comfort and convenience, and we see an erosion of respect for life and the dignity of the human person. Moreover, there is the disruption of ecological balances by the

uncontrolled destruction of plant and animal life; much of this, into our local streams and rivers, and from a reckless use of aerosol products. Finally, we have to guard against indiscriminate biological and genetic research and experimentation. This is already underway in plants and animals and we are constantly faced with proposals for genetic experimentation on humans. For example, the whole debate about government funding in the U.S of fetal research is a signal of real danger.

Population growth has frequently been pinpointed as a major cause of pollution and resource depletion. This issue must be seen in a large context. Population growth, of and by itself, is not the primary cause of environmental degradation. In all countries, the environmental impact of the technology factor is significantly greater than the influence of population size or affluence, according to UN statistics. The situation here can be described in terms of a war between the ecosphere and the technosphere. Many ecologists remind us that the greatest thrust to the environment comes from the life-styles of the wealthy and the affluent who consume far more capita than do the populations of the developing nations.

In addressing population issues, respect for the dignity of the person and the protection of the inherent right of parents to decide freely and responsibly on the number of children are the guiding moral principles. Alleviation of poverty and wider educational opportunities, as well as recognition of women's rights and potentialities contribute to moral decision-making regarding childbearing and parenting.

SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

There is a clear connection between socio-economic inequities and environmental injustice. Linking justice for creation with justice for those on the margins of society conceptually and practically is an emerging task.

Environmental justice deals with the ethics of how to share equitably the environmental, social, and economic benefits and burdens constitutes the moral challenge we face as the human community in caring for God's creation.

The challenge poses two questions: How are the needs of the poor and disadvantaged being met in environmentally responsible ways? Can the moral principle of the common good help us find the way to preserve and enhance the global commons?

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* wrote that "human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social questions. It is through work that men express who they are as persons contributing to the unfolding of creation and the building up of the community. Because work is so fundamental to the life of a person and the life of society, the treatment of workers, the conditions under which they work, and the type of work they do take on great importance as matters of justice". Work and environmental justice are not competing problems; they are complementary requirements of the common good.

This common good has to be safeguard by the developed nations in helping the developing ones achieve sustainable development. According to the article "The Harvest of Justice Is Shown in Peace".

Sustainable development focuses on preserving the ecological heritage of the earth and confronting and eradicating poverty in the poorest nations. It is concerned with quality of life rather than simply quantity in the industrial world. It seeks to promote environmentally sensitive technology.

This type of authentic and sustainable development will help promote the earth's resources and regenerative capacities and lessen the impact of population on the growth and decline of the environment. In carrying out such a development strategy, the developed nations must

avoid a serious abuse and offense against human solidarity when industrial enterprises in the richer countries profit from the economics and legislative weaknesses of poorer countries to locate production plants or accumulate waste which will have a degrading effect on the environment and on people's health.

In a world growing closer every day, the Universal Common good must serve as the foundation and guiding environmental ethic. Let us apply this ethic in our daily life.

We can trim our consumption patterns, especially in terms of convenience goods. We can conserve water and energy. We can properly dispose our garbage and recycle things. We can plant and maintain trees. We can start a compost pile in our yards and use organic pesticides and fertilizers. We can buy locally made items and reduce the use of disposable products. We can carpool and use public transportation when possible. We can train our youths on sustainable-living practices. We can join environmental and pro-life groups. We can support efforts to preserve natural habitats and bio-diversity. We can explore and use alternative energy sources. We can bike or walk for short trips. Etc.

The basic moral imperative is that caring for the earth and protecting the environment promotes and sustains the common good and humanity—now and for untold centuries to come. Self-interest, individual comforts and benefits must be sacrificed for the common welfare. The common good must supersede individual consideration, for when the common good is ignored and neglected, the good of the individual is likewise violated.

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