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**Safeguarding the Creation: The catholic approach**

It's evident: any enquiry dealing with the responsibility of the Christians regarding the Creation would show that most of them would not feel concerned.

"Let us deal with the poor, the sick persons, this is our mission on earth, but why should we act for the Creation in the name of our baptism?"

...and if you find persons who feel concerned by these questions, you will often hear:

" You are right: the Christians are involved in the state of our environment, but rather as bad example!

Do we not read, in Genesis 1.28: " Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea,...."

It's a fact that such a text does not correspond to an ecological point of view. In his literal interpretation, it simply cannot be accepted, it's evident.

But what is very interesting, and permit me to insist on this, because it seems me fundamental, is that if we return to the original text, if we replace this injunction, this real order in his historical and social context and analyse it from an exegetical point of view, then we will discover that this text reveals a different sense and becomes acceptable! Let's take the example of dominating. In the Jewish tradition, the father – or the grand-father – dominated the whole family in the sense that he was completely responsible for his well-being, helping members who were ill, trying to resolve disputes, taking care of the disabled,....He had powers, but also many obligations!

Now, what concerns the famous "be fruitful and multiply"; its important to keep in memory that this appeal was launched when the Jewish people is obliged, for the second time, to leave his native land and is deported to Babylone. He feels completely abandoned by his God, is discouraged and has lost any hope for a better future. It's in these conditions tat the prophet tries to develop again confidence in God, proclaiming:

"don't give up! God is still with you and will help you if you accept to change your way of life! Become fruitful and multiply"

You will agree that this analysis conducts to completely different conclusions and these comments show the necessity to avoid a superficial and quick lecture of the biblical texts, as they lead to wrong and caricatural conclusions, and explain perhaps certain attitudes regarding our religion!

The last example I would mention concerns the first chapters of the Bible, where we find two different stories of the Creation, in truth often very, very different, even in opposition, which is of course more than surprising. But, here, also a detailed analysis explains this situation; just one comment: 500 years separate these 2 symbolic narrations.

Forgive me for having insisted on this exegetic approach, but I am convinced that the basis of our faith, the Bible, must be considered as a serious and credible reference and not as a succession of incoherent and incomprehensible texts.

Having said this, I inform you immediately that many texts, especially of the Old Testament, precise without any doubt, the responsibility of Mankind regarding the Creation and God's endless love for the Creation.

A first example: when Noah is entering in the boat, God asks him:  
"Take into the boat with you a male and a female of every kind of animal and of every kind of bird, in order to keep them alive. Take along all kinds of food for you and for them."  
(Gn.6.19-20).

The second example shows the endless love of our God to the whole Creation: Speaking to Noah and his sons, he says:

"I am now making my covenant with you and with your descendants, and with all living beings – all birds and all animals – everything that came out the boat with you. With these words I make my covenant with you: I promise that never again will a flood destroy the earth.....I am putting my bow in the clouds. It will be sign of my covenant with the world. Whenever I cover the sky with clouds and the rainbow appears, I will remember my promise to you and all the animals that a flood will never again destroy all living beings....That is the sign of the promise which I am making to all living beings." (Gn.9.8-17).

But the most relevant, the most fundamental text which concerns Mankind's responsibility is certainly:

"The Lord took the Man, and put him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and to guard it."  
(Gn.2.15)

I recognize in this sentence the leitmotiv, the basic concept of the conclusions of the Rio de Janeiro conference, June 1992, on "Environment and Development":

The sustainable development.

When God asks us to cultivate the Garden of Eden (= the Biosphere), does this not mean that we have to develop it, to exploit the natural resources (mineral and living species) in producing fruits in the most general sense?

When God asks us to guard the garden of Eden, does this not mean that we have to maintain its richness, the potentialities of the earth, for our benefit and this of the future generations?

Yes, in every field of our activities (economic, social, leisure,...) we have to apply the sustainable development concept.

It's in this spirit that are organized, next January, in Lyon (France), the Christian Sitzings of the globalisation.

The book of the Genesis concerns of course very often the Creation, as it describes its creation! But many other books show the importance of the Creation, and stress – through the voice of the psalmists and the prophets, for example Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah – the beauty of God's work and insist on the necessity of not disrupting the natural order decreed by him. It's also important to praise, with the whole Creation, God and to thank him for his permanent generosity and support.

The Church fathers, when giving their views on the behaviour of their fellow-citizens, often referred to the Creation. His preservation, the struggle against injustice and the promotion of peace have been considered by the Church from its very origins, as more or less linked.

But, it's a fact, during most centuries, environmental preoccupations have not especially been mentioned. One can understand this, as the problems of depletion and pollution of the resources were not so important as today.

But this situation has radically changed in the last 50 years.

On 6<sup>th</sup> December 1971, Cardinal Villot, Vatican Secretary of State, when addressing the Italian Union of Catholic Jurists who had met to study the problem of man and his environment, stated that:

"every attack on Creation is an insult to the Creator"!

On 18<sup>th</sup> August 1985, Pope John Paul II officially visited the Headquarters of the United Nations Environmental Programme in Nairobi proclaiming:

"God is glorified when the Creation is at the service of Man's full development".

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One month later, the Pope told the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that "the protection of the environment merits the greatest attention and is truly of enormous importance at this time in the history and development of the modern world"

In his encyclical "Sollicitudo rei socialis" Pope John-Paul II gives an important place to the problem of the exploitation of the Creation, as in all following basic texts or speeches.

But one is of particular interest: it's the Message that the Pope delivered on 1 January 1990, during the celebration of the World Peace Day, the theme of which was: "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all Creation"

Among the conclusions, he mentions the need for a new solidarity, especially with regard to the developing countries; present-day society must seriously change its lifestyle; education in ecological responsibility is necessary and urgent; the aesthetic value of Creation must also be enhanced and it must be fully realised that the ecological crisis is both a world problem and a moral one.

The commitment of believers to work for a healthy environment seems directly from the faith in God the Creator. According to Saint – Francis of Assisi, who in 1979 was proclaimed patron saint of ecologists, by being at peace with God we can better devote ourselves to building peace with all Creation; this is inseparable from peace between nations.

At the same period, a historical event has to be mentioned, historical from an ecumenical point of view, historical from an ecological point of view.

For the first time, 700 representatives of all different Churches in Europe met officially, in Basle (Switzerland), from 15 to 21 May 1989, with some thousands of observers from all Christian movements: charismatic renewal, Neocatechumenate, Quakers, and so on.

First aim of this European Ecumenical Assembly: analyse the urgent problems of the day: unemployment, latent or open conflicts, all manner of unrest and discontent, and new: *the degradation of the environment*, second step: a search to determine the responsibility of the Christians, and, above all, to discover in the light of the Gospel, practical solutions which could be applied both by the Churches and other Christian communities, and by individuals.

The final document, of 30 pages, presents strong recommendations of action in the fields of Peace, justice and.....Integrity of the creation. I cannot develop these last now, I would simply underline their actuality!

Eight years later, a second European Ecumenical Assembly took place in Graz (Austria), in a new context, as all European countries were now free! The same basic problems were studied and of course also the preservation and sustainable management of the Creation! Four recommendations were approved in this area concerning the necessity of a new life style, the creation of a European network of Church designated responsables for the Creation, an annual celebration of the Creation and the implementation of Agenda 21 adopted at the Rio de Janeiro conference of 1992.

A third gathering was organised in 2001, in Strasbourg (France), but with less participants, where was adopted the *Charta oecumenica*", real action programme for the Churches in Europe. It's of high actuality, as it stresses contacts and cooperation with Judaism, Islam and other religions and world views. Safeguarding the Creation is also integrated.

You will not be surprised if I tell you that in the last years, and today, many other initiatives have been taken in this field of growing actuality by our Churches, initiatives taken as well at the highest level as by simple members of Church movements, associations, .....

A very interesting one is the so-called Venetian Declaration proclaimed jointly by the Holy Father and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the 10<sup>th</sup> June 2002. They observe that "in our own time we are witnessing a growth of an ecological awareness which needs to be encouraged, so that it will lead to practical programmes and initiatives." After having underlined the necessity of an act of repentance, they mention also that "the problem is not

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simply economic and technological, it is moral and spiritual." The declaration proposes six ethical objectives, referring to the children, the solidarity, everyone's responsibility, the principle of subsidiarity.

Considering the present state of our environment, and the increasing number of official declarations, you will not be surprised if, today, positive initiatives and concrete actions are developed at all levels of the Catholic Church and in all countries, all movements.

Concerning the bishop's conferences, several of them in the developing countries (Philippines, of Central America..) have officially protested against the systematic destruction of their tropical forests: 14 million ha every year in the whole world.

The bishops of the Congo Brazzaville have severely criticized the pauperisation of their country, when the petrol extraction conducts to enormous benefices for the oil companies and some privileged groups.

Before the summit of the so-called G8 in Genoa, July 2001, the bishops of the Liguria region published a declaration where they requested a new morality regarding the serious, and often dramatic problems (of economic, financial, social, ecological, cultural and political order) resulting from a globalisation which does not respect the fundamental rights of the society and of every citizen. After this summit, they strongly supported the catholic movements who protested against the present economic policy where the rich are always more rich and the poor increasingly poor.

Let us precise, that it was not question do condemn the principle of globalisation, but to oppose to its present conception.

In numerous situations, for example when accidents happen, bishops feel obliged, referring to the Gospel, to express their disapproval, indeed their indignation. An excellent example is given by the bishop of Bayonne, South-West France, who wrote in the Catholic Daily Newspaper "LA CROIX", the 23 December 1999, after the wreck of the tanker "Erika":

We have to catch the eye on the spirit of rapine and the tremendous concurrence which are more and more observed in the world of the sea. We denounce the irresponsibility of some leaders of the finance or of the international trade which develops an unacceptable market, where the poor are the victims.

I could give many other examples concerning the future of the Creation, so often threatened by different behaviours. Only one more, of particular importance: after the terrible and unacceptable criminal attempt of 11 September 2001, amongst the different considerations which could contribute to such acts of terrorism, bishop Henri Derouet, past President of PAX CHRISTI, recalled this prophecy of Bernanos: "the steps of the poor will make tremble the earth".

It's certainly not wrong!

I have illustrated bishop's engagements, I could give more examples of concrete actions undertaken by Church movements, associations, individual Christians.

In France, for example, PAX CHRISTI is active since 1991 with its first training course on the water resources, examined from an ecological, economic and social point of view, but including also a celebration centred on this God's resource. More than 10 colloquies, symposiums followed, the most interesting being the so called "Klingenthal Symposiums".

The great originality of these 5 sessions was that a specific component of the Creation (the water, the soil, the vegetation, the animals) was first studied from an ecological, socio-economic, political point of view, and then representatives of the main world religions (including shintoists) and of indigenous peoples (from Australia, Russia, Canada, Amazon...) and non believers expressed their socio-cultural, spiritual approach. The fundamental conclusion of these symposiums is the "*Klingenthal Appeal*", where is well shown that all religions and cultures recommend the respect and a careful exploitation of all natural resources. Taking into account all these different initiatives, the bishops of France adopted a Declaration on "*The respect of the Creation*" and established officially, in PAX CHRISTI, an *Environmental Unit*. This group is presently preparing for the French Christians, a book based on the excellent Italian one, headed: *Responsabilita per il Creato*.

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In Switzerland, the *Ecumenical Commission on Church and the Environment*, composed by Catholic and Protestant parishes, movements, individual members, is active since 1986. Every year, the Creation is celebrated in September, on a specific theme, as in 1992: *the earth must save its skin*, consecrated to the climate changes. During Lent, Caritas and the protestant charity movement often devote their action in favour of the Creation, sometimes even on very sensible subjects, as the use of money (in 2001), the right to soil possession, ....

The German Christians have perhaps the greatest experience, as those of the Nordic countries, to act in favour of the Environment. Most dioceses have nominated a responsible for the environmental questions, and often support financially ecological transformations in churches, Catholic schools or other buildings (when utilising for example sun energy). In 1977, already, the diocese of Freiburg i.B. encouraged all priests to encourage the nesting of the Barn owl. Today, numerous initiatives are taken, and e.g. extensive, or biological agriculture strongly supported.

Finally, let me inform you that at European level, action develops too. Following the Graz recommendations, the Council of European Bishops' Conferences has created a European network of responsables for the environment who meets annually, studying a specific theme. The 5<sup>th</sup> Consultation, foreseen next month in Breslau (Polen), will be devoted to the training of Christians regarding their responsibility in the fields of the Creation and sustainable development

Some persons have perhaps been surprised that in this statement presenting the catholic approach regarding the Creation, I have spoken about trade, money, lifestyles,.... This is of course not at all in opposition with the necessity to pray, to glorify and thank God for his Creation, not at all.

If I have insisted on the concrete actions, it's because we have perhaps tendency to forget that we have to build up God's Kingdom today, where we are, and let us remember that after every day of his Creation, "God was pleased with what He saw". Hence, we have of course to praise our Lord, to thank him for the Creation He asked us to preserve, but we have also to deal with all the concrete problems we are faced, with our qualities, our weaknesses, but always with God's support.

Amen