

USE,

DON'T

ABUSE



C O M M A N D M E N T O N E

THE BIBLE LAYS OUT THE FUNDAMENTAL MORAL PRINCIPLES OF HOW TO CONFRONT THE ECOLOGICAL QUESTION. **THE HUMAN PERSON, MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE, IS SUPERIOR TO ALL OTHER EARTHLY CREATURES, WHICH SHOULD IN TURN BE USED RESPONSIBLY.** CHRIST'S INCARNATION AND HIS TEACHINGS TESTIFY TO THE VALUE OF NATURE: NOTHING THAT EXISTS IN THIS WORLD IS OUTSIDE THE DIVINE PLAN OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION.



We begin at the beginning: Genesis. The story of Creation. The first of the Ten Commandments for the Environment encourages us to look anew at the first book of the Bible, where the instructions for ethical behavior toward the earth are woven into the very fabric of Creation.

Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”

God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, saying: “Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth.”

God also said: “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food.” And so it happened.

God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good. (Gen 1:27–31)

The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. (Gen 2:15)

God put human beings in charge of the earth, to have dominion over the animals and to “cultivate and care” for the land. But almost from the beginning, problems arose. The perfect harmony of humanity and the rest of Creation was ruptured. Early human beings, contrary to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s still lingering theory of the “Noble Savage,” did not walk gently on the earth, leaving no mark but a few bent branches and footprints, but used and even exploited it and its other inhabitants. For example, some scientists believe that the woolly mammoths that once roamed the plains of North America were pushed into extinction by overhunting, an idea that runs contrary to the notion that our ancestors lived harmoniously with nature.<sup>1</sup> It is known for sure that the native residents of Wrangel Island, the last bastion of the mammoths, killed the final mammoth on earth about 2000 years ago<sup>2</sup> and that the Maori killed off the entire Moa bird population in New Zealand within probably a few hundred years after their arrival on the island.

Such use and misuse of the land is not limited to small, isolated areas. Among the theories put forth to explain the collapse of the highly developed civilization of the Mayans, which extended over vast parts of what is now Mexico and Central America, is over-exploitation of natural resources, in particular of the rainforest.<sup>3</sup> University of Arizona archaeologist T. Patrick Culbert says pollen recovered from underground debris shows clearly that “there was almost no tropical forest left,”<sup>4</sup> a human-created disaster that certainly contributed to the decline and eventual fall of the culture.

Perhaps the clearest example of premodern environmental destruction lies a little over 2000 miles west of Chile in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The barren wasteland that is now Easter Island was created entirely by human action. Originally the island was a subtropical paradise, covered with trees and home to innumerable species of animals, but by the time of European contact, deforestation down to the last tree completely destroyed the ecosystem, turning the area into a desolate, rat-infested rock.<sup>5</sup>

These are but a few of the places where premodern humanity has wreaked havoc on the earth, even if it was done out of ignorance and lack of understanding, rather than deliberate malice. The underlying problem, as Pope Benedict has succinctly noted, is that God's original command to "have dominion over the earth" has been sorely corrupted:

As long as the earth was considered as God's Creation, the task of "subduing" it was never intended as an order to enslave it but rather as a task of being guardians of Creation and developing its gifts; of actively collaborating in God's work ourselves, in the evolution that he ordered in the world so that the gifts of Creation might be appreciated rather than trampled upon and destroyed.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly the gifts of Creation have been these and are being trampled on. Just consider these profoundly unsettling facts:

- ☞ Rainforests once covered 14 percent of the earth's land surface; they now cover 6 percent.
- ☞ Nearly half of the world's species of plants, animals, and microorganisms will be destroyed or severely threatened over the next quarter-century due to rainforest deforestation.

- ☞ Experts estimate that 137 plant, animal, and insect species are lost every single day due to rainforest deforestation. That equates to 50,000 species a year.<sup>7</sup>
- ☞ No glaciers will be present in Glacier National Park by 2030.<sup>8</sup>
- ☞ 40,000 kilometers of sea ice has already melted in the Arctic.<sup>9</sup>
- ☞ Because of the loss of sea ice, polar bears are unable to get to their food sources of ringed seals and are turning to cannibalism to survive.<sup>10</sup>
- ☞ By 2032, more than 90 percent of the range of the great apes will suffer from humans' development, including 99 percent of the orangutan range.<sup>11</sup>
- ☞ A quarter of the world's mammals and one out of every eight plants face extinction. If current trends continue, half of all species on earth will be gone within one hundred years.<sup>12</sup>

### *A New Vision*

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In the face of such frightening prospects, Benedict is telling us—all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike—that we were created to be caregivers, stewards, champions of God's Creation, not despotic rulers. Speaking to the youth of the world in Australia, Benedict reminded them, and all of us, that "God's Creation is one and it is good." He went on to say, "Our world has grown weary of greed, exploitation, and division, of the tedium of false idols and piecemeal responses, and the pain of false promises. Our hearts and minds are yearning for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built,

where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion.”<sup>13</sup>

The notion that humanity can, and indeed should, live in “respectful communion” with nature has become increasingly urgent. In the last few decades, a confluence of symptoms combined to alert scientists to the indisputable fact that the earth was sick and getting sicker by the day—rising ocean temperatures, melting glaciers, holes in the ozone layer, vanishing species, unprecedented natural disasters. Perhaps if we had paid attention to Svante Arrhenius, a Swedish scientist who claimed in 1896 that use of fossil fuels could result in global warming, we would not have been so startled in 1988 to learn that the planet was warmer than it had been in a century, a phenomenon dubbed “the Greenhouse Effect.”<sup>14</sup>

At about the same time that scientists were sounding environmental alarm bells, Pope John Paul II was pointing out the moral imperative to protect the planet. At his General Audience on January 17, 2001, he said:

The human creature receives a mission to govern Creation in order to make all its potential shine. Unfortunately, if we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts, and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, degrading that “flowerbed”—to use an image from Dante Alighieri (*Paradiso*, XXII, 151)—which is the earth, our dwelling-place. We must therefore encourage and support

the “ecological conversion” which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading. Man is no longer the Creator’s “steward”, but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, both scientific and papal exhortations were largely ignored when they first began speaking out.

But no longer. Pope Benedict has taken up his predecessor’s mantle with an unexpected exigency and clarity. “Our earth is talking to us,” he said during a meeting with the clergy of the dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso in July 2007:

We all see that today man can destroy the foundation of his existence, his Earth. We cannot simply do what we want with this Earth of ours, with what has been entrusted to us. On the contrary, we must respect the inner laws of creation, of this earth, we must learn these laws and obey these laws if we wish to survive. This obedience to the voice of the Earth, of being, is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, the desires of the moment. In short, this is a first criterion to learn: that being itself, our earth, speaks to us and we must listen if we want to survive and decipher the message of the earth.<sup>16</sup>

### *Creation and Redemption Are Inseparable*

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What sets Pope Benedict apart from scientists and other world leaders who are expressing deep concern about the future of the earth is that Benedict, as did



John Paul before him, links Creation with Redemption. Above we noted Fr. Golser's question to Benedict in a question-and-answer session in 2007. In his reply to Fr. Golser, Benedict emphasized this link between Creation and Redemption:

In recent decades, the doctrine of Creation had almost disappeared in theology, it was almost imperceptible. We are now aware of the damage that this has caused. The Redeemer is the Creator, and if we do not proclaim God in his full grandeur—as Creator and as Redeemer—we also diminish the value of the Redemption. Indeed, if God has no role in Creation, if he is relegated merely to a historical context, how can he truly understand the whole of our life? How could he truly bring salvation for humanity in its entirety and for the world in its totality? This is why for me, renewal of the doctrine of Creation, and a new understanding of the inseparability of Creation and Redemption, takes on such great importance. We have to recognize anew: He is the *Creator Spiritus*, the Reason from whom in the beginning everything is born, and of which our own reason is but a spark. It is he, the Creator himself, who entered into history and can still enter into history and act in it, because he is the God of the whole and not just of a part. If we recognize this, obviously what follows is that the Redemption, what it means to be Christian, and simply the Christian faith in itself, always signify responsibility with regard to Creation . . . .

Creation is groaning—we can sense it, we can almost hear it—and it is waiting for human beings who will preserve it in accordance with God. The brutal consumption of Creation begins

where God is missing, where matter has become simply material for us, where we ourselves are the ultimate measure, where everything is simply our property and we consume it only for ourselves. The waste of Creation begins where we no longer recognize any claim beyond ourselves, seeing only ourselves; it begins where there is no longer any dimension of life beyond death, where in this life we have to grab everything and take hold of life with the maximum intensity possible, where we have to possess everything it is possible to possess.

I believe, therefore, that true and effective measures against the waste and destruction of Creation can only be realized and developed, understood and lived, when Creation is considered as beginning with God; when life is considered on the basis of God and has its major dimensions in responsibility before God; life that one day will be given by God in its fullness and never taken away. In giving life, we receive it.<sup>17</sup>

Pope Benedict emphasizes that earthly life and eternal life, Creation and Redemption, are not only linked, but are inseparable. In Christ, we have become “new creatures,” as St. Paul says, but through that redemptive process, we are obligated to join creatively with God in “renewing the face of the earth.” By becoming man, by walking on the earth, basking in the sun, eating of its produce, and interacting with its wildlife, Jesus affirmed the words of Genesis: “And God saw that it was good.”

Even before he was Pope, Benedict wrote about the link between Creation and Redemption:

Two movements are interacting here. One is that of human beings who do not exploit the world

and do not want to detach it from the Creator's governance and make it their own property; rather they recognize it as God's gift and built it up in keeping with what it was created for. Conversely, we see that the world, which was created to be at one with its Lord, is not a threat but a gift and a sign of the saving and unifying goodness of God.<sup>18</sup>

Pope John Paul expressed the same thought quite eloquently in his first encyclical:

The Redeemer of the world! In him has been revealed in a new and more wonderful way the fundamental truth concerning Creation to which the Book of Genesis gives witness when it repeats several times: "God saw that it was good." The good has its source in Wisdom and Love. In Jesus Christ the visible world which God created for man—the world that, when sin entered, "was subjected to futility"—recovers again its original link with the divine source of Wisdom and Love. Indeed, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." As this link was broken in the man Adam, so in the Man Christ it was re-forged. Are we of the twentieth century not convinced of the overpoweringly eloquent words of the Apostle of the Gentiles concerning the "Creation (that) has been groaning in travail together until now" and "waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God," the Creation that "was subjected to futility"? Does not the previously unknown immense progress—which has taken place especially in the course of this century—in the field of man's dominion over the world itself reveal—to a previously unknown degree—that manifold subjection "to futility"? It is enough to recall certain phenomena, such as the threat of pollution

of the natural environment in areas of rapid industrialization, or the armed conflicts continually breaking out over and over again, or the prospects of self-destruction through the use of atomic, hydrogen, neutron, and similar weapons, or the lack of respect for the life of the unborn. The world of the new age, the world of space flights, the world of the previously unattained conquests of science and technology—is it not also the world “groaning in travail” that “waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God”? (*Redemptor Hominis*, 8)

### *God Found It Very Good*

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Which returns us to the First Commandment for the Environment. Although humanity stands at the apex of Creation, all of nature is valuable if for no other reason than it reflects the glory and majesty of God. Our responsibility then is to respect Creation, not subjugating it to our whim and will, but tending to it as it fulfills God’s own purposes. We are cooperators with the Creator in preserving and maintaining Creation itself.

In a question-and-answer session with journalists aboard the papal plane on his way to World Youth Day 2008 in Australia, Benedict observed,

In this historical moment, we begin to see that we do need God. We can do so many things, but we cannot create our climate. We thought we could do it, but we cannot do it. We need the gift of the Earth, the gift of water, we need the Creator. The Creator reappears in his Creation. And so we also come to understand that we cannot be really happy, cannot be really promoting

justice for all the world, without a criterion at work in our own ideas, without a God who is just, and gives us the light, and gives us life.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, it is important to recognize the significance of this commandment with regard to our treatment of our fellow members of the animal kingdom. In an interview with journalist Peter Seewald in 2000, Benedict expressed deep concern for the well-being of all animals who share our planet:

We can see that they are given into our care, that we cannot just do whatever we want with them. Animals, too, are God's creatures, and even if they do not have the same direct relation to God that man has, they are still creatures of his will, creatures we must respect as companions in creation and as important elements in the creation. . . . Certainly, a sort of industrial use of creatures, so that geese are fed in such a way as to produce as large a liver as possible, or hens live so packed together that they become just caricatures of birds, this degrading of living creatures to a commodity seems to me in fact to contradict the relationship of mutuality that comes across in the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

And so we end where we began—with Genesis. As Benedict said in his introductory remarks to the young in Australia:

The views afforded of our planet from the air [on the flight to Australia] were truly wondrous. The sparkle of the Mediterranean, the grandeur of the north African desert, the lushness of Asia's forestation, the vastness of the Pacific Ocean, the horizon upon which the sun rose and set, and the majestic splendor of Australia's natural beauty which I have been able to enjoy these last couple of days; these all evoke a profound sense of awe.

It is as though one catches glimpses of the Genesis Creation story—light and darkness, the sun and the moon, the waters, the earth, and living creatures; all of which are “good” in God’s eyes (cf. Gen 1:1–2:4). Immersed in such beauty, who could not echo the words of the Psalmist in praise of the Creator: “how majestic is your name in all the earth?” (Ps 8:1).<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, it is a wonder-filled and wonderful world that has been entrusted to our care. Now it is up to us to make sure that it lasts as long as we do.