

CLIMATE CHANGE AND PASTORAL COMMITMENTS.

INTRODUCTION

Down through the centuries the Church has had the task, given to it by Divine mandate to proclaim the gospel in a rich variety of historic circumstances and conditions affecting the daily lives of the human family. In fact those engaged in the mission fields know full well that unless they work tirelessly to overcome the circumstances and conditions that hold their people back and bring them suffering, on a daily basis, then the preaching of the Good News will at best be compromised by a perceived lack of compassion. At worst it will fall on deaf ears. The Lord Jesus himself came not only to preach, but to heal. (Lk 4:16-22)

The Second Vatican Council gave a beautiful and clear summary of the practical nature of the Church's mission:

“The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in theirs..... That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.” (GS,1.)

These words were written in 1965. For me their echo is as strong today as the followers of Christ, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seek to meet the challenges of Climate Change with faithful hearts.

1. OBJECTIONS TO THE CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT

Some people, both from within the Church and outside of it, express some surprise to me that the Church's voice is being heard on the issue of Climate Change. I think that surprise stems from two presuppositions. First, that Climate Change is a political issue and therefore something the Church should stay away from. Secondly, Climate Change is the province of science and the so called “greenies”: it has nothing to do with the work of the Church which is to preach and celebrate the sacraments.

I would answer the first presupposition by arguing that something which is predicted, by a vast weight of scientific research and evidence, to affect the entire human family and indeed all life on Earth must be placed above political lines of division. This is by definition a global issue which demands global action. Only a concerted effort by a united meeting of minds and hearts can bring about the remedial action being called for by so many in the scientific community.

With regard to the second presupposition, I would answer this according to the way I began this presentation. Nothing that is genuinely human can fail to find an

echo in the minds and hearts of those intent on preaching the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments.

2. WHAT HAS CATHOLICISM TO OFFER?

- (a) The Catholic Church can contribute to the environmental movement in unique and much needed ways. The Church is not just “another voice” telling people to conserve energy and preserve the planet. It has the potential to bring its vast Tradition to shed light on a troubled human family.

Through two thousand years of lived Tradition the Church as “a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s Kingdom” (GS,1) has come to understand how people work and what activates them. I believe this is somewhat missing in the debate at the moment.

- (b) The environmental movement is perceived by the general population as negative and “finger waving”, that is all about blaming humanity for the destruction of the planet. Telling people things are all bad, all of the time, and we are to blame, is quite simply bad psychology. This makes people feel disempowered, demoralized and fatalistic.

The Church understands that people need to celebrate. Human beings are created to need joy, fun, celebration, awe and wonder. Without these things we live less than a fully human life according to God’s creative plan. (cf Gs 2:5-25)

Celebration is built into the Church’s Tradition and it does celebrate really well. Yes there is Lent and then there is Easter (and even Lent is described in the Liturgy as a “joyful season”). Celebrating and giving thanks for this amazing planet is vital to keeping us motivated to do something about Climate Change.

- (c) The Church knows that human beings are truly meant to live on this earth. (Gn 1:26-35) Christianity is not the only religion to believe that, of course. Indeed to a religious person, the dignity of the human race is a given. Nevertheless, at times it seems that we are told by the “environmentalists” that just by existing human beings are destroying the planet. But the Church affirms that we are meant to be here. We have a priestly and prophetic duty to care for the Earth. For us it is not merely a matter of preserving the Earth, but doing our best to allow it to be as glorious as God meant it to be. Our care for the Earth, often described as stewardship should also involve sheer wonder at what an amazing planet this is. I believe the Church has the language to move people’s hearts, not just their minds.
- (d) The human race needs to hear urgently that forgiveness is a gift of God constantly on offer. People respond to this reality, very strongly. The Church has always preached forgiveness. In the context of Climate Change we need to know that past wrongs can be healed and the lessons learned. We need to move on with clear hearts and minds. I believe that Catholicism understands the nuances of forgiveness particularly well. It knows how lingering guilt can grind a person to a halt and cause psychological disfunction. In the Climate Change debate the voice of forgiveness, as a gift from God, needs to be heard. We have done harm to the Earth but with forgiveness we can move on, positively.
- (e) The Church understands that a conversion, or a “putting right of what has gone wrong”, takes time. We cannot save the world in a week, or a year. People

themselves take time to change. When people are somehow forced to move at a pace which is beyond them change, if it does take place, is only temporary and has shallow roots. Real conversion takes root in the heart and produces lasting effects for good.

Climate Change is an urgent issue, but unless action is accompanied by deep seated contemplation and awareness of the divine presence, gently but ardently urging us on, then our response will be reduced to mere activism. We will in that case lack real and creative insight and will be tempted to give up in the face of difficulty and advancing years.

- (f) The Church understands what is vital to the future of the planet. It understands what a sustainable community is and how it functions. Catholicism has a deep knowledge of the values that are needed to create a vibrant, dynamic yet stable community. Those in religious life as part of the Church's Tradition, live these things everyday (more or less well with human frailty notwithstanding). Stability, obedience, humility, hope, simplicity, contemplation and love are things which the broader society needs to fold into its structure if we are to face the challenges of Climate Change. There needs to be a public reappraisal of what it is that actually makes a healthy community work. The voice of the Church has a rich treasure to offer.
- (g) Our Catholic Tradition teaches us to carefully consider our needs, to make sure that the things we think we need are really the things we need. (in a society based on consumerism) The discipline of spiritual discernment which would ask the question before we consume "Do you need this, really?" needs to be taught more ardently than ever before. It may not be a popular question, but I believe that the Catholic Church has a duty to provide Society with different models for the future. The belief that economic growth based on consumerism is always a good thing, should at least be put under question. Sustainability into the long term will depend in part on how we use and consume the goods of this earth.
- (h) I believe that the Church needs to help people, especially in heavily industrialized nations, to reconnect with God's creation. We live in a privileged time of human development when advances in scientific investigation have made it possible for us to better understand the Earth, the Solar system, its place in the Cosmos and how the Universe works. There is still a great deal we do not understand. Since the birth of science, when Galileo first pointed his telescope to the heavens and saw the moons of Jupiter, until the present day, all we have done is "dip our toes into a vast ocean".

I believe the anxiety in the world about the natural environment is not just about Climate Change, important as that is. For some reason the environmental movement and Climate Change have become synonymous. Nevertheless people are wondering now whether or not we are alone in the Universe. Is there life on other planets? There is an emerging understanding that this small fragile, beautiful but resilient planet may well be unique in the Cosmos. In any case it is the only planet available to us on which to live. In this big picture context there are still large environmental issues to be addressed regarding pollution, the health of the oceans and the extinction of species of animals and plants at an alarming rate. We know that in the scheme of things everything is connected for better or

for worse. Everything needs to be addressed prayerfully, calmly, lovingly, hopefully and faithfully. The Church can aid this process. It has the Tradition, the benefit of divine Revelation and the abiding presence of Christ. By concentrating on Climate Change alone it is easy to be distracted by all the debate about whether it is happening or not and who is to blame. All the while we have a Christian duty to live simple, responsible lives whether Climate Change is happening or not. Christ never preached the way to holiness is through over consumption and ongoing economic growth. Simple, stable, respectful living is at the very heart of a religious life well lived in the Spirit, and a truly wonderful future. The Church has the concepts, the language and the richness of its Tradition to communicate these things.

3. WHAT CAN THE CHURCH DO?

(a) FAITH AND SCIENCE

I mentioned earlier that we live in a privileged time in human history. We are far from complete knowledge about how the Universe works, but we do know so much more than our ancestors and even more than my parents did just over fifty years ago. The general population often assumes that the Church and scientists are enemies; opponents like two prize fighters waiting to have it out in the ring. This is not true. It is a supposition which has its roots in the days of Galileo and subsequently in the Age of the Enlightenment. I am sure everyone at this meeting knows that faith and science are not opposed to one another, but I believe the Church needs to find ways to alert the wider community that faith and science are gifts from God who is Truth and who made the universe from nothing. It is my opinion that wherever possible, each diocese should have within its structure a body responsible for making the diocese aware of the best of what science has to say. In this context its focus would be Climate Change. Dioceses have structures for the liturgy, pastoral care, health, education and so on, all of which are good. Why do we not take special care to listen to good and responsible scientists? Those commissioned by local ordinaries to do this work should also be charged with the task of bringing the Church's theological and spiritual Tradition to the insights of science so that the local church's response will have a completeness brought about by a rich harmonizing of faith and science. In this way the truths of Divine Revelation and the Church's Tradition will shed the light of meaning on the scientific endeavour. At the same time the facts understood by science will enliven a sense of wonder and awe, and a spirit of thanksgiving in the heart of the believer as he or she contemplates the handiwork of the One who made the Universe.

It is my view that Conferences of Bishops should establish a body within their structures to deal with the same dynamic between faith and science as I have just outlined for local ordinaries.

In the end I believe it is important that the deep suspicion held by some faithful catholics towards the discipline of science and the men and women who make this their life's work, must eventually come to an end as a matter of principle.

At the same time some discernment is necessary in order to judge the bona fides of scientific opinion. In the past and I dare say possibly in the present, there are some who claim a view in the name of science but whose motives are not pure. In other words it will be for each local church to discern and listen to good science and bring it to bear on the best theological reflection it can.

(b) THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Whether it be through its teaching institutions or through the structure I have just described, it is important that the special dignity and honour which belongs to the human race be made clear to all. It is our faith that God placed humanity at the summit of the Creation. To think of myself in these terms is a staggering thing. All the while our privileged position with regard to God's Creation is tempered by the knowledge that God is God and we are not. We know that we are not the explanation for our own existence. None of us asked to be born. None of us from our own resources can secure our eternal existence.

It is through our faith, founded in Divine Revelation, that God has called us into a partnership with him by his choice and plan. God is in unceasing dialogue with humanity and in that never ending conversation with the Creator we find truth and inspiration to make sound moral judgments concerning the use of the world's goods.

This partnership surely involves God as Creator and human beings as stewards of what God has made. Our vocation to be stewards of Creation is no mere added extra consideration of our place in the scheme of things. It stems, rather, from the reality of God and the truth about ourselves.

That is why I believe that each diocese needs within its structure a body to deal with what science is teaching us about the created order, especially as it pertains to the local area of each diocese. In turn each local ordinary can speak pastorally to his people about their surroundings and what God is asking of them in order to live in their natural environment, happily, justly and fruitfully.

(c) ENGAGING THE IMAGINATION

Whatever the Teaching Church has to say about Climate Change it needs to say in a way that engages the imagination and moves the heart. It is not enough to convince the mind, as vitally important as that task is! The Church must do its best, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to instill in its people and the society at large, a reverence for what God has made. Not to "worship" the Earth in any way but to value it because the Creator values it. This is an affair of the heart.

For me personally a special appreciation of the Earth was given to me by the astronauts of the Apollo program who had the joy and privilege of seeing the Earth as it rose above the mountains of the Moon. What impressed them was its sheer beauty and delicate fragility. As they stood in the stark loneliness of the Lunar surface, they looked back at the Earth in wonder. That little blue green ball was held in the utter blackness of space and in those days was home to four billion people. On that planet was everyone and everything they knew and loved. Seeing the Earth from that view point changed them irrevocably. Listening to their stories changed me too.

I will never forget Christmas Eve 1968 when the three astronauts of Apollo 8 read the seven day creation account from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. These were tough test pilots engaged in the greatest of science's adventures. All through that wonderful reading the grainy picture from their television camera was of the Earth, photographed live in black and white from the window of the Command Module of their space vehicle. When the reading was over they wished "everyone on the good Earth a happy Christmas from the crew of Apollo 8." For me, that occasion had an even greater impact than when Neil Armstrong first set foot on the surface of the Moon. To hear the astronauts proclaim the Work of God from over 200,000 miles away in space, "God saw all that he had made and found it very good," captured my imagination, appealed to my faith and will remain with me always.

From then on I could never see this lovely planet as merely something to be consumed. I have tried to engender in those I meet a sense of wonder. The young especially have a hunger for an appreciation of creation that is boundless.

(d) AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EVANGELISATION

Over and above all of this, Christians believe the Earth has been given a status which raises it above anything in the Universe by the Incarnation of the Son of God. At a moment in time the Author of the Universe, the Word of God, took flesh, had a human body and a human soul, and walked on this extra-ordinary planet. For us to believe in good conscience that the Person through whom and for whom the whole Creation exists, actually lived here, died here, and rose to life again here, must change the way we view this our home. This is no ordinary planet and human beings are no ordinary creatures. According to St. Athanasius, "God became human so that humans could become gods."

Climate Change and the general concern of people for the natural environment offers the Church a profound opportunity to evangelise: to tell the world of these wonderful truths in a way that is fresh, completely in harmony of the Tradition, deeply respectful of science and speaks to contemporary hopes and anxieties. I believe the Holy Spirit is urging us to do this.

CONCLUSION

To meet the challenge of Climate Change will require a change of mind and heart. The pastoral commitment of the Church will be to foster in a new and imaginative way a religious conversion to the will of God so that we will all have the courage and motivation under God's grace to do what we need to safeguard this garden planet. I am describing what John Paul II called the "ecological conversion".

I am not speaking of a Utopian view of the future, rather, in a hopeful spirit, and deeply conscious of my own short comings, aim at a way of life on earth that conforms to the intentions of the Person who gave me life, who knows me by my name, who made the Universe and chose me to live as part of it. I am speaking of a grateful heart which knows that God has saved us from hopelessness and selfishness. Because of this all our effort on behalf of God's Creation is worthwhile.

After all, I know him personally, and he knows me and all my brothers and sisters, he who made and found to be very good everything that exists.

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