

'Guardians of God's Creation':

A statement from the bishops on the 'unprecedented ecological crisis'

When writing 'The Call of Creation' in 2002, we, the Bishops of England and Wales, said that "care for the environment presents a major challenge for the whole of humanity in the 21st century."¹

The passing of time makes this challenge clearer. It is now an unprecedented 'ecological crisis.'^{2,3} "A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path to renewal."⁴ "We are called to be instruments of God our Father, so that our planet might be what he desired when he created it and correspond with his plan for peace, beauty and fullness."⁵ Our Christian responsibility for the planet begins with appreciation of the goodness of all of God's creation: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Gen 1:31). "For you love all things that exist and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it" (Wis 11:24).

Growing in Awareness of Creation

"Our Sister, Mother Earth,"⁶ "now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her."⁷ Expert study points to a devastating losses in biodiversity, with up to a million species facing extinction,⁸ and an estimated 1.0°C of global warming since pre-industrial levels. This warming is already manifesting itself in changes to the intensity and frequency of climate and weather extremes, impacting on natural and human systems.⁹ The worst impacts are felt by developing countries¹⁰ and by populations that are already disadvantaged or vulnerable.¹¹

Pope Francis states that our relationship with the planet has become confrontational,¹² based on the illusion of unlimited growth on a planet with finite resources. This risks leaving a degraded environment for future generations. In the past, a lack of understanding could be claimed, but harm done going forward

is done with full knowledge of the impact our activities. Younger generations are not blind to this fact. We must both consider the kind of world we want to leave to children who are now growing up,¹³ and find responsible ways of doing so.

Discerning the threats to our common home

Pope Francis is forthright when he says: "Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world."¹⁴ Scientists talk of 'tipping points' in ecosystems and in global warming which, once reached, could plunge us into a much changed environment from which it will be difficult, if not impossible, to find our way out. If we are to avoid such scenarios, a concerted effort and widespread change to our current lifestyles will be necessary. These include approximately halving our carbon emissions, globally, by 2030 at the latest.¹⁵

This is not a primarily scientific concern. Pope St John Paul II explained that "the seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis."¹⁶ Pope Francis reminds us that everything is interconnected, that we are faced with a complex crisis that is both environmental and social, and that "genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others."¹⁷

The challenge before us is to learn to care, in the same breath, not only for the beauty of God's creation, its bounteous biodiversity and life sustaining ecosystems, but also for the unborn, the elderly, those who are victims of exploitation, and others thrown away by a society focused on the satisfaction of our supposed needs as consumers.¹⁸ "How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?"¹⁹ We have only one

heart, and the same heart that fails to show care for the natural world is the same heart that will fail to show compassion to the vulnerable.

A Catholic Response

It is possible to change course. Scientific research gives us an insight into what our future earth may look like. But all projections depend on the actions that we take today. We must take action urgently. We are aware of the common but differentiated responsibilities, with greater attention given to “the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests.”²⁰ We must face this challenge with confidence in the knowledge that the worst effects this ecological crisis can still be avoided. “Nobody can go off into battle unless he is fully convinced of victory beforehand. If we start without confidence, we have already lost half of the battle and we bury our talents.”²¹

Central to this challenge will be the development of a Christian spirituality of ecology, and a call to a new lifestyle, beginning in personal and family life. The crisis we face is a summons to a profound interior conversion, whereby the effects of our relationship with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us.²²

As disciples, we are invited to be part of the redeeming mission of Christ, and to approach our task with joy and gratitude. “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”²³ Whilst capable of the worst, human beings are also able to start again and choose what is good²⁴ so as to more fully participate in the drama of salvation history, leading all creatures back to their creator. “...all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things.”²⁵

A Way Forward...

We look to avoid the worst consequences of this ecological crisis by engaging now and over the next decade on this 'long path to renewal.'

As Bishops, we will review the 'Call of Creation' to reflect on our present situation and to promote good practice for diocese, parishes, schools, families and individuals. We need a more considered relationship with our God, our neighbour and the earth through the way we manage our resources as a Church.

We, the Bishops of England and Wales commit ourselves and invite our people to engage in this urgent challenge, so that together we show leadership by our actions.

Let us pray for wisdom and courage for the path ahead.

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- 1: The Call of Creation (Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2002)
 - 2: Laudato Si' [15]
 - 3: Plenary Resolution, The Stewardship of God's Creation (CBCEW, 13/05/2019)
 - 4: Laudato Si' [202]
 - 5: Laudato Si' [53]
 - 6: Laudato Si' [1]
 - 7: Laudato Si' [2]
 - 8: Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, 2019)
 - 9: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'Global Warming of 1.5 °C' Special Report (2018)
 - 10: Laudato Si' [25]
 - 11: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'Global Warming of 1.5 °C' Special Report (2018)
 - 12: Laudato Si' [106]
 - 13: Laudato Si' [160]
 - 14: Laudato Si' [161]
 - 15: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'Global Warming of 1.5 °C' Special Report (2018)
 - 16: Message of his holiness Pope John Paul II for the celebration of the World Day of Peace 1 January 1990 [13]
 - 17: Laudato Si' [70]
 - 18: The Call of Creation (Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2002)
 - 19: Laudato Si' [120]
 - 20: Laudato Si' [31, 170]