

Rerum Novarum Lecture

“Stewardship: Handling God’s Creation Responsibly”

“In the beginning”, these words open the Book of Genesis and also the Gospel according to John. It is a wonderfully evocative phrase which recalls that creation had a beginning, when time and space began. Before the beginning nothing other than God existed. There was no matter, no space, no time. There was only God; the eternal God who always was.

It is difficult if not impossible, for us who are bound by space and time in a three dimensional world, to imagine a being who never had a beginning. In fact little children often ask me, “Who made God?” When I tell them that no one made God their faces display a mixture of wonder and perplexity.

Faith takes us beyond mere imagination to believe in and relate to the Divine presence. It is a personal presence of the God who has chosen to reveal himself to us. He has let us know who he is, our place in the universe, how we are meant to live and what is our final destiny.

God revealed himself to the People of Israel as the one and only true God, there is no other. The living experience of the presence of God in history was the foundation of the faith of Israel.

The magnificent account of the creation of the universe by God, as told in the Book of Genesis, is a wonderful expression of that faith.

Genesis reveals a God who is sovereign and free, who decides to create from no necessity and no reason is given. And yet it was no mere impulse, God knew what he was doing. The universe was created and unfolds according to the divine plan.

Consider the utterly tremendous power of God who was able to create something as vast as the Universe from nothing. The thing which staggers me when I consider the Universe is that not only is it immense but it is old, very old (at least by human reckoning). When astronomers

look through their telescopes they refer to objects as “far away and long ago”.

Although light travels at 300,000 km per second it is still relatively slow given the size of the Universe and therefore the distances it must travel so that its radiation can enliven our senses to perceive those things which make up the Universe.

If we were to make a scale model of the Universe where the Sun was shown as the size of your thumbnail, then the nearest star would be about 250 km away. And light on that scale would take just over four years to get there! Imagine taking four years to travel 250 km.

We perceive the Universe in a certain way because of our place in it. We are small; it is large. An astronomer once asked me, “Do you think God made all this just to blow our minds?” The question gave me pause to think, but I told him that the answer may well be, Yes!

Which ever way you look at it God’s creation is amazing. It is evidence of the awesome power, great beauty, intelligence and love of the Person who made it. Today we think there are as many stars in the Universe as grains of sand on all the world’s beaches, plus the deserts, multiplied by ten. Our Sun, itself a star fuses millions of tons of hydrogen molecules every second. The energy emitted by its nuclear furnace radiates out into space in every direction. A small amount reaches our planet to give us enough light and heat to drive the earth’s weather patterns and to enable life to exist on this tiny, fragile, but extraordinarily beautiful planet.

Once upon a time human beings thought that the Earth was literally the centre of the Universe. Everything rotated around this planet as if it were the hub of a giant wheel. But now we know that the earth orbits the Sun in a family of planets, four of which are very much larger than the earth. In fact all the planets of the Solar System would fit into Jupiter with room to spare.

To our mind the Solar System is a big place but it exists in a galaxy known as the Milky Way which has over 100 billion stars. These islands of stars, as the galaxies are sometimes described, are scattered throughout the Universe in their billions.

In the scheme of things the earth would appear to be of little consequence, as would the creatures that inhabit it.

And yet we know it as our home. It is a beautiful benign planet despite its raging storms and awesome geological activity. It may also be quite unique in the Universe because the number of factors which must converge to allow the Earth to exist in the form it does are such that it is not likely to be repeated.

Our belief is that none of this happened by mere chance or accident. It was by God's will that the earth came to be. Faith, informed by Divine Revelation, gives us the stance and attitude we should have towards the earth in particular and the Universe in general. All of it is the work of God's creative action. We live in the space and time of this world by God's choice and gift. It is given to us on trust to enjoy, to make use of and to manage responsibly.

We also know that God saw all that he had made and found it very good. (Gen 1:4) God placed the human being at the summit of the creation. We enjoy a privileged position, and with privilege comes responsibility. This dynamic is part of our mundane everyday experience. People in privileged positions of power have a great deal expected of them by the general population and they are held to public account for their actions. When they are given something on trust they must respect the wishes of the donor.

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.

Our relationship with the world in conformity with God's plan makes up part of our human identity. And that relationship is in turn the result of another still deeper relationship between ourselves and God. We are God's partners by his choice and plan. God has chosen to reveal himself to us and seeks always to remain in dialogue with us whom he loves beyond our comprehension. In the context of this never ending conversation with the Creator we find truth and inspiration and the understanding we need to know how best to make sound moral

judgments concerning the present use of the world's goods and the future of the world.

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 us with whom the Creator is in constant dialogue.

We know this Earth as the garden which we have been given to look after so that it can produce its fruits. We know this as a privilege and a duty.

For the People of God, the creation was an object of praise "O Lord how great are your works! In wisdom you have made them all". Ps104. "When I see the heavens the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you have made, what is man that you care for him?" mortal man that you keep him in mind?" Ps 8

As if all of this was not wonderful enough, consider the truth proclaimed in the gospel. The Author of the universe came and dwelt among us. This is how the prologue of St John's Gospel expresses it. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. Everything that exists had its existence through him and for him. And nothing exists except through him.....And the Word became flesh and lived amongst us."

The sheer scope of this message means that only faith can embrace its mystery. Only through faith can we know the person responsible for the Universe who is now as human as you or I (though he is without sin).

Vatican II's document on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) says it beautifully and simply. "God chose to walk among us as a friend." The image reminds me of the garden in which God placed Adam and Eve. God came looking for them in the cool of the evening but they were in hiding because of their shame. And now God has come looking for us in the most definitive way possible. He has come to this garden planet to seek us out, to enter into a profound dialogue with us, to show us the way, to teach us the truth and to secure our life that will never end.

Are we hiding from him still, refusing to admit the truth. Have we really accepted him? Do we really want to do things his way?

God has chosen to offer salvation to the human race not from a distance, not from outside, but by dwelling in the world of the created order as a true human, with a human body and a human soul, without ever ceasing to be God. He has made all things new. Jesus has inaugurated a new world (in which everything is subjected to him (1 Cor 15)

What sin has broken down he will build up into a new harmony. St Paul writes, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has passed away, behold, the new has come (2Cor 5:17). “Nature, which was created in the Word is, by the same Word made flesh, reconciled to God and given new peace (cf Col 1:15-20). The letter to the Romans describes the whole of creation as being in one great act of giving birth as it awaits full liberation.

This faith perspective should be the inspiration and motivation for the way the Christian makes use of the goods of the Earth. It also sheds light on how best to use technology. Gaudium et Spes affirms that we “judge rightly by an intellect that surpasses the material universe, for we share in the light of the divine mind.” (GS15)

Gaudium et Spes goes on to say that human beings, “created in God’s image, received a mandate to subject to themselves the earth and all that it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness, a mandate to relate themselves and the totality of things to him who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, by the subjection of all things to the human race, the name of God would be wonderful in all the earth.” (GS 34)

Human beings have always laboured to harvest , mine and manufacture that which comes from the earth. The fruit of the earth combined with the work of human hands has produced the basics for sustaining our life, namely food and drink. Our God-given appreciation for beauty and form have been expressed through the hands of skilled artisans in every culture on earth as they worked with raw materials from the earth.

With the dawn of science and the scientific method four hundred years ago we found ways to develop technologies to give us more and more power to use the earth's fruits for our benefit. The power of human reason is also a gift from God, as are all our talents. As such they do not exist in opposition to God's power. In fact they point to the greatness of God and his mysterious plan for the human race. But as our powers increase through scientific and technological advances, our responsibility for the use of those powers in ways that conform with the Divine purpose increases proportionally. As good stewards we must desire to use our powers wisely.

“In this regard, the Church has repeatedly emphasized that the Catholic Church is in no way opposed to progress, rather she considers ‘science and technology are a wonderful product of a God-given human creativity, since they have provided us with wonderful possibilities, and we all gratefully benefit from them’.” (John Paul II 25 February, 1981)

Technology is a tool, a means, a way to solve and meet challenges which confront us on a global scale. Hunger and diseases which can be alleviated with new medicines and strains of plants and crops pose a challenge and an opportunity to make the world a better place.

However, technology is a means to an end which must always be seen as the good of humanity. Technology and the use of technology is not neutral. It can be used for good or ill; progress or degradation. (cf John Paul II meeting with scientists and representatives of the United Nations University, Hiroshima).

The exercise of prudence is of critical importance. To simply proceed with the use of technology because it is available and without thorough consideration of its effects on the common good, and for the health of the earth and biosphere, is irresponsible. Such action does not come from a proper use of human reason, nor does it fulfil our vocation of stewardship.

“A central point of reference for every scientific and technological application is respect for men and women, which must also be accompanied by a necessary attitude of respect for other living creatures.” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, no 459). Included in this attitude of respect is the thoughtful appreciation of the

nature of each species (human, animal and plant) and the mutual connection and interdependence of each in an ordered system of life.

Any indiscriminate use of biotechnology in the genetic manipulation of human, plant and animal life results in great harm being done to the integrity of the human race and to the Earth's ecosystems. Pressures that arise from a profit driven agenda must not blind us to the consequences of our use of technology. Those same pressures should not force us to act without taking the time for consideration that prudence demands. Everything we do as people who believe in God must always be founded on a deep appreciation for what the Creator has given us on trust. We are called to be good and trustworthy stewards.

We must be very careful not to set ourselves up as God's opponents. In that case we would also oppose the very creation which is ordered for our good. In so doing we "end up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature". (John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, 37)

Instead, God wants our co-operation. We are to enter into a joint venture with the God who loves us and all that he has made. This honour and invitation is extended only to human beings. All other forms of life are in a way, at our mercy. Yet we abuse that life at our peril.

"The tendency towards an 'ill-considered exploitation of the resources of creation is the result of a long historical and cultural process." (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 461). We live on the most benign planet in the Solar System and possibly in the entire Universe. Earth is a teeming garden of life. It offers hospitality to all living creatures. Its environment and ecosystems are home to the jewel of God's creation; the human race created in the image and likeness of God.

None of us would use our family home in a way that would threaten its ability to provide us with comfort, protection and shelter. Similarly, to use the earth only as a 'resource' risks threatening its viability as our 'home'. (cf Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 461). And so a tension exists between exploitation of the Earth and our need to live on it.

The Earth is a finite resource and the only planet on which we can live. Outside our thin layer of atmosphere is a hostile environment. Considered in this way the Earth is like a space vehicle speeding through the vacuum of space with everything on board needed to sustain life.

This view of the Earth was given to us especially by the astronauts of the Apollo programme 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 was home to 5 billion people. On that planet was everyone and all that they knew and loved. Seeing the Earth from that vantage point changed them irrevocably.

I will never forget Christmas Eve 1968 when the three astronauts of Apollo 8 read the whole of the seven day creation account from the book of Genesis. 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 word of God from 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. This place is where life is sustained; it cannot be reduced to a resource available for mere exploitation.

Attitudes of exploitation and consumerism “do not arise from scientific and technological research but from scientism and technocratic ideologies”. (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 462). In other words, the human being has a transcendent dimension. Our openness to God’s self revelation in Jesus, our appreciation of the good, the true and the beautiful, set us apart and mark us out as unique in all

the creation. Progress in scientific knowledge in itself does not cause human beings to ignore the reality of transcendence, indeed it may well serve to heighten our awareness of the beauty, intelligence and power of God. But the replacement of God with science and technology leads to a reduced, narrowed view of things where we do what we want because we can. As stewards we are called to do much better than that.

On the other hand we must be careful not to absolutise nature and the environment. The world of nature is not above the dignity of the human person. Some even tend to 'divinise the earth' or personalize it in some way. In the name of the ecology they promote a world view that is contrary to Divine Revelation.

Along side of this is the promotion of the idea that there is no real difference between human beings and other living creatures, since the biosphere is considered in this world view as one entity of 'undifferentiated value'. While it is true that all life on earth is interdependent and that we cannot harm one species without in some way doing damage to all species including our own, it is also true that we have a superior responsibility of stewardship given by God to care for the earth. We share life with all living things, but they do not share our dignity, privilege, responsibility or vocation.

We can only begin to grasp the nature of our responsibility for the environment within the context of relationship with God who made all things. "This is why Christian culture has always recognized the creatures that surround us as also gifts of God to be nurtured and safeguarded with a sense of gratitude to the Creator." (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 464) One of the great contributions of the late John Paul II was his emphasis on the intimate connection between environmental ecology and human ecology. In calling for the ecological conversion John Paul wanted to reinvigorate our sense of oneness with God our creator and oneness with all his creatures. The late pope wanted us to be converted to a view that sought to care for the earth with a motivation that sprang from our loving relationship with God and of God with us his co-workers and friends.

Across the world to-day there is a general acceptance that we face an ecological crisis of global proportions. A global crisis can only be met by a global effort. Our interdependence demands such action.

We are indebted to the scientists, rural people, foresters, fisher people, writers, artists, photographers, educators, business people, government officials, and all who have helped humanity become aware that the earth is in trouble.

The Earth system is complex and science even now is only beginning to unlock its intricate detail. The land, oceans, atmosphere, lithosphere and living organisms all exchange energy, water and chemicals in biochemical cycles. These cycles are our planetary life support systems and Earth's climate is the result of their complex interactions.

Research has concluded that since the beginning of the industrial revolution, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has risen by nearly 30%, methane more than doubled, and nitrous oxide has risen by about 15%. The use of fossil fuels accounts for about 80% of human – caused carbon emissions.

Carbon cycles naturally move between the atmosphere, vegetation on land, the oceans and the lithosphere. The amount of greenhouse gases humans are releasing into the atmosphere exceeds the absorption capacity of the oceans and vegetation on land. Deforestation has further reduced the absorption of carbon dioxide. We are facing consequences that will influence the way we human beings will live on this planet in the future. Carbon stores energy. With a more energetic atmosphere we face severe droughts and floods. Storms and cyclones will be more intense and have greater destructive power. Poorer countries will suffer disproportionately because they lack the resources to respond. Geographic and seasonal patterns of rainfall will alter.

Of overarching importance is the fact that contemporary society has developed on the assumption that the global climate is constant. Science has demonstrated this assumption is false, even in the absence of human forced climate change. Much of our infrastructure is therefore locked into current patterns of rainfall and temperature. Dam specifications, coastal works, irrigation networks, cropping systems presuppose a stable climate regime. The human and economic costs of climate change will be immense.

A critical part of any response lies in the continuing development of alternative sources of energy that can substitute for greenhouse – gas emitting fossil fuels. While a mentality of “technological fixes” may be grasped by some as an escape from the reality of global climate change, nevertheless, there is a real need for scientific research into technologies which reduce carbon emissions.

At the international, national and local levels of government there is a developing commitment to secure a safe and healthy natural environment through new legislation. This effort has been stimulated by public opinion which looks to the common good and asks that those who pollute be punished in some way. But laws in themselves are not sufficient. They must be accompanied by attitudinal change, and a lifestyle that seeks to protect the natural environment.

From our Catholic point of view our response should have a firm spiritual and theological foundation. As well, it should also involve our careful listening to the very best science has to offer.

At times the available scientific data are contradictory. As well, the research is still a work in progress and of necessity there are uncertainties. Scientists themselves do not always agree and while some devote their energies to defend a particular theory, others will try to disprove it. The general population can and does become confused at times.

In these circumstances it seems proper to invoke the “precautionary principle” which aims at managing a situation of uncertainty. We make decisions conscious of the possibility of modification if and when new data come to hand. We must admit that science cannot always provide ready assurances about the absence of risk. “Prudent policies, based on the precautionary principle require that decisions be based on a comparison of the risks and benefits foreseen for the various possible alternatives, including the decision not to intervene.” (Compendium of the Social doctrine of the Church, 469)

In this context economic decisions regarding the use of natural resources must pay heed to the uncertainties surrounding our present circumstances and the serious responsibility to safeguard the integrity of nature. Safeguarding the environment comes at an economic cost.

However there must be harmony between our need for economic development and the need of the natural environment for protection.

**“An economy respectful of the environment will not have the maximization of profits as its only objective, because environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits. The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded and promoted by market forces.”
(Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 470)**

At times our push for economic growth can blind us to longer term consequences that will ironically be economically detrimental to future generations.

But in the end the issues surrounding the health of the natural environment , its weather patterns and ecosystems are not only scientific, technological, political and economic, they have at their foundation the very nature of the person and our relationship with our Creator. Economic degradation points to a spiritual imperative that views the Earth as sheer gift, given to us by God on trust. We have a vocation to be stewards of Creation.

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 extraordinary planet. For us to believe in good conscience that the Person through whom and for whom the whole of 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”. Through our incorporation as members of Christ’s body we are meant to be conformed to God in the most profound way. Our thoughts words and deeds should therefore flow from God. We should see and love the Creation as God sees and loves it.

To change our ways will therefore require a change of mind and heart. To protect the natural environment will require a religious conversion to the will of God so that we will 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".

A new mentality will lead to new life styles "in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of the common good are the factors that determine consumer choices, saving and investments." (John Paul II "Centisimus Annus, 36)

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.