

# THE CALL OF CREATION

**Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales**

Department for Social Justice



# Foreword

A joint foreword by Bishop John Arnold, Lead Bishop for the Environment, and Bishop Richard Moth, Chair of the Department for Social Justice at the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

The finishing touches were being made to this new edition of *The Call of Creation* as temperatures reached 40°C in our country for the first time. This not only broke all previous temperature records; it did so by some distance. This and other indicators demonstrate the urgency of needing to care properly for our common home. Jesus called on us to read the 'signs of the times'. If we are to do that with integrity in our current age, we must surely realise that there is no time to delay and that our actions must be decisive. It is in this context that the Department for Social Justice of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales is launching this new edition of *The Call of Creation* which has been significantly revised and updated since the original publication in 2002.

We are launching this document during the *Season of Creation 2022*, close to the feast of St. Francis which brings the *Season* to a close. As Pope Francis has written, Saint Francis invites us to see nature as a magnificent book in which God speaks to us and grants us a glimpse of His infinite beauty and goodness. The Pope has noted that St. Francis had asked that part of the friary garden always be left untouched, so that wild flowers and herbs could grow there, and those who saw them could raise their minds to God, the Creator of such beauty. Rather than a resource to be exploited, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.

A truly Catholic understanding of the environmental crisis does not see it as simply a series of individual problems that need to be solved but rather the result of a broken relationship with God's creation. This crisis

exists because we do not have the right relationship with God's creation. As Pope Francis has written in his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si*, the development of our relationship with God depends also on having the right relationship with each other and with God's creation: 'The world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend towards God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things... This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures' (*Laudato Si*, §240).

If we have a disordered relationship with creation, we commit what the Pope has described as 'ecological sins' through acts and habits that pollute and destroy the harmony of the environment thereby undermining our shared duty of stewardship of the natural world as a gift from God for past, present, and future generations.

But we are a people of hope who believe in redemption. We must study the signs of the times and take the action that is needed to repair our relationship with God's creation. As is made clear in this document, the exercise of the virtue of solidarity and the promotion of the common good, which are so needed at this time, are the responsibility of each and every individual and institution in society. We must all learn to respect nature in ways that are consistent with its God-given laws.

Individual choices can seem insignificant when faced with major global challenges. But Pope Francis has rightly stated that multiplied individual actions can indeed make a real difference. As individual children of God, it is important that we think carefully about how we use consumer goods and value simplicity in our lives. We should also care for, and nurture, that part of God's creation for which we are particularly responsible. By doing this, collectively, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we can also help to change our culture.

At the parish, diocesan, and national level, the Church must, and will, play its part. This involves taking action to reduce carbon emissions as well as protecting and promoting biodiversity. We must also take action within our Catholic schools, colleges, and universities, encouraging actions even in simple ways. We must develop our long-term strategic planning to reduce our carbon footprint substantially and, in other respects, contribute to the care of the natural environment.

We also have to recognise that action must be taken at the political level and that such action needs to be on a global scale. As Pope Francis wrote in *Laudato Si*: 'We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalisation of indifference' (*Laudato Si*, §52). It was for that reason that we encouraged the Government to be bold when the United Kingdom hosted the COP 26 summit on

Climate Change last year, and it is of vital importance that these annual world meetings, the next one of which is in Egypt in November this year, monitor progress in reducing carbon emissions and seek international agreement for further action.

The Church has long spoken prophetically about the environment. Pope Paul VI wrote in 1971: 'Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace - pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity - but the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family' (*Octogesima Adveniens*, §21). More recently, Pope Benedict XVI wrote in 2009: 'The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole' (*Caritas in Veritate*, §48).

With this established teaching of the Church in mind, we hope that parishes, schools, universities, families, and individuals will study this document and discuss it, but not do so simply as an intellectual exercise. We all urgently need to review our relationship with God's creation and take action to help reverse the trends that are causing climate change and the loss of biodiversity. We seek the intercession of St. Francis of Assisi in the necessary action that must take place at every level in Church and Society.



**Bishop John Arnold**

Lead Bishop for the Environment



**Bishop Richard Moth**

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# I. Introduction

Why we have a responsibility to play our part in addressing the environmental crisis



It has become clear that what was once a ‘major challenge’ for the whole of humanity in the 21st Century<sup>1</sup> has now become an unprecedented ecological crisis.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales wishes to add, once more, its voice to the many calling for urgent action to protect our earthly home from further destruction. We are following a way of life that disregards and damages God’s creation, forces the poor into greater poverty, and threatens the right of future generations to a healthy environment and to their fair share of the earth’s wealth and resources. This is contrary to the vision of the Gospel.

The environmental crisis is especially complex since it involves not only many branches of scientific knowledge but also politics and economics. The Church recognises and respects the ‘autonomy of earthly affairs’ in all these disciplines.<sup>3</sup> Her own task is to ‘read the signs of the times’ and to uncover the spiritual and moral issues that lie at the root of the challenges of our time.

Care for the earth is fundamental to the universal good, since the health, well-being, and very survival of all life depends on a healthy environment. The full human development of every human person both now and in future generations cannot be separated from the fate of the earth.

In Catholic Social Teaching, the concept of the common good 'implies that every individual, no matter how high or low, has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community as well as a right to benefit from that welfare'.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, each of us has a responsibility to play our part in addressing the environmental crisis. What is happening to the earth indicates that we must think beyond local and national interests and define 'the community' in global terms, as well as extending this definition to include future generations.<sup>5</sup> The way we live and the choices we make affect the lives of others, including the poorest people in the world who will be less able to adapt to changes in the environment. Our choices will also affect the lives of the generations who are to follow us. All of us must take responsibility for this crisis and act accordingly.

The Bishops' Conference presents these reflections once again, 20 years after they were first offered, to all people of goodwill, but particularly to Catholics, Christians of other denominations, and followers of those other religions that recognise the earth as the gift of a loving Creator. The task before us is 'the shared responsibility of the human race' and demands the united effort of all humanity.<sup>6</sup> In presenting these reflections, the Bishops of England and Wales are speaking in unison with the Holy Father, Pope Francis, who has frequently expressed serious concerns about these issues, especially in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si*.



## II. What have we done to the earth?

Understanding the damage that has been done to the environment.



Damage to the environment affects every part of creation. Hardly a day goes by without some mention of these matters in the media. For many people, this volume of information can be bewildering, since the issues are so wide-ranging, and many do not, at first sight, concern us here in England and Wales.

The earth's temperature has risen by at least 1.1°C since pre-industrial times.<sup>7</sup> This may seem like a small figure, but relatively small changes in the earth's temperature have dramatic effects. And even in the United Kingdom, seven of the ten summers between 2011 and 2020 reached a temperature of 34°C. This compares with just seven of the 50 summers from 1961–2010. In addition, six of the ten wettest years on record have been since 1998.<sup>8</sup>

Our low-lying coastal towns and cities are at particular risk of sea level rise and the Government is already having to spend large sums of money to protect them.<sup>9</sup> These are the kind of trends that we would expect to accelerate as the climate changes.

The problems we have caused can be grouped into four main areas: damage to the earth's life-sustaining mechanisms, depletion of the world's natural resources, the impact on the world's poor, and the loss of beauty and diversity.

## Damage to the earth's life-sustaining mechanisms

The natural world is made up of many different delicate and intricately interconnected systems that have nurtured and sustained life for millions of years, giving rise to fertile soil, clean water, and a pure atmosphere. Now, in many places, these life-sustaining mechanisms are breaking down through climate change, pollution, and abuse. Fresh water that was once teeming with an abundance and variety of life is often dead; beautiful coasts have been turned into sewers; and fertile soil lies barren or has turned into desert.<sup>10</sup> Forests, often described as the lungs of the earth, are reduced to wasteland, and cities are choked with smog.<sup>11</sup> Emissions of 'greenhouse gases' and other pollutants continue to affect the atmosphere in ways that threaten the balance of life on the planet.<sup>12</sup> The resulting change in the climate threatens the most vulnerable and will severely disrupt the lives of all of humankind.



With determination and the right attitude towards the environment, we can change things. If we care for creation, we can make a difference. In some parts of the world, there are signs of increases in forest cover,<sup>13</sup> there are successful re-wilding projects in previously destroyed parts of the planet<sup>14</sup> and, in some areas, we see a growth in the preponderance of certain types of wildlife.<sup>15</sup> We note these things not to promote complacency but to show that we can, if we choose, change course.

## Depletion of the world's natural resources

Our wealth and our way of life depend on the raw materials that are the earth's gifts to us. Much of what we produce and consume derives from these raw materials. Yet these finite resources are being exploited as if they were limitless. World consumption of metals, minerals, and other materials continues to rise. Scarcities arising from the depletion of non-renewable natural resources threaten international stability and peace, as well as those who immediately depend on them.



## The impact on the world's poor

Environmental destruction and social and distributive injustice often go hand-in-hand. Damage to the environment will affect the poor most of all, since poor communities inhabit the worst-affected and most vulnerable locations and often have the least capacity to respond to and recover from disaster.

And it is the poor who have contributed least to the damage. We in affluent countries consume a far larger proportion of the world's natural resources than those in poorer countries. As a result, and not surprisingly, between 1990 and 2015 it is estimated that the richest 10 per cent of the world's population produced carbon emissions per capita which were more than seven times those of the poorest 50 per cent of the world's population.<sup>16</sup> In addition, much of our consumption becomes waste almost immediately. Meanwhile, around 700 million people remain below the poverty line that indicates they cannot afford even the basic necessities of life.<sup>17</sup>

The Church has traditionally taught that private property is important in serving a wider social purpose and helping to bring to fulfilment the principle of the universal destination of material goods.

But there are limits imposed on the right to property. In the fourth century, the great bishop St Ambrose, citing the Gospel of Luke, wrote as follows: 'If God's providence bestows an unfailing supply of food on the birds of the air who neither sow nor reap, we ought to realise that the reason for people's supply running short is human greed. The fruits of the earth were given to feed all without distinction and nobody can claim any particular rights. Instead, we have lost the sense of the communion of goods, rushing to turn these goods into private property.'<sup>18</sup>

When it comes to caring for our common home, there can be a positive dimension to private property. As Pope Francis wrote in *Fratelli Tutti*: 'Everyone loves and cares for his or her native land and village, just as they love and care for their home and are personally responsible for its upkeep.'

The common good likewise requires that we protect and love our native land. Otherwise, the consequences of

a disaster in one country will end up affecting the entire planet. All this brings

**Damage to the environment will affect the poor most of all, since poor communities inhabit the worst-affected and most vulnerable locations.**





out the positive meaning of the right to property: I care for and cultivate something that I possess, in such a way that it can contribute to the good of all.<sup>19</sup>

But there are also limits to private ownership when it comes to caring for the environment. The goods of the earth are not to be monopolised by powerful individuals and groups. Furthermore, some environmental resources are genuinely common. For example, we cannot simply allow the emission of carbon and pollutants into the atmosphere without caring about the consequences for humanity as a whole – especially the poorest and including generations who are to come. And yet that is precisely what we are doing.

### **The loss of beauty and diversity**

Human activity has always shaped its environment, including many places now considered areas of great ‘natural beauty’. More recently, economic growth, technology, urbanisation, and the shift in land ownership from small-scale farmers to powerful corporations have magnified the scale of this human impact. Grasslands and forests are destroyed for commercial gain; the oceans are over-exploited. Indeed, many experts believe that we are in the process of a ‘sixth mass extinction’ of a million species, which, unlike earlier mass extinctions, is being caused by human action.<sup>20</sup> The loss of species is undeniable and, with this loss of species, our need for beauty and our communion with the other creatures of the earth are denied.

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**We all urgently need to review our relationship with God's creation and take action to help reverse the trends that are causing climate change and the loss of biodiversity.**

Bishop John Arnold and  
Bishop Richard Moth



# III. Understanding the 'Signs of the Times'

Civil society, politics, war, changing moral attitudes, lifestyles, and behaviour.



The ecological crisis has revealed the interdependence of all creation. Whatever we do, whatever choices we make, other people and the earth itself are affected. The symptoms of distress that have been outlined indicate that many human beings have lost an understanding of their true place in creation.

By regarding the natural world merely as the 'setting' in which we live, and by treating the gifts of creation solely for the satisfaction of our supposed needs as consumers, we have become alienated from the earth and from each other, and so damaged our relationship with God.

These issues were raised explicitly by Pope Paul VI over 50 years ago. He wrote: 'Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation.'<sup>21</sup>

And then Pope John Paul II commented in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*:

‘Man often seems to see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for immediate use and consumption. Yet it was the Creator’s will that man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble “master” and “guardian”, and not as a heedless “exploiter” and “destroyer”.’<sup>22</sup>

He felt able to write more optimistically eight years later:

‘Among today’s positive signs we must also mention a greater realisation of the limits of available resources, and of the need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature and to take them into account when planning for development, rather than sacrificing them to certain demagogic ideas about the latter.’<sup>23</sup>

However, though Pope John Paul II’s observation was correct, environmental destruction continued, and so Pope Francis felt it necessary to expand on Church teaching in this area with the publication of *Laudato Si*. Pope Francis has written about how our broken relationships with the environment are at the root of ecological problems:

‘Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently’ (*Laudato Si*, §159).

The plight of the earth demonstrates that an individualistic materialism cannot be allowed to drive out responsibility and love:

‘Our difficulty in taking up this challenge seriously has much to do with an ethical and cultural decline which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment... We see this in the crisis of family and social ties and the difficulties of recognising the other’ (*Laudato Si*, §162).

It is encouraging that many Christian Churches, and people from other religious traditions and none, have advocated a new attitude towards our common home.



Pope Francis is not alone in stressing that the earth and its resources are given for the whole of humankind, including future generations, and not just for the privileged few of today. His All-Holiness Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, has said:

‘As Orthodox Christians, we use the Greek word *kairos* to describe a moment in time, often a brief moment in time, which has eternal significance. For the human race as a whole, there is now a *kairos*, a decisive time in our relationship with God’s creation. We will either act in time to protect life on earth from the worst consequences of human folly, or we will fail to act. May God grant us the wisdom to act in time. Amen.’<sup>24</sup>

This renewed emphasis on the environment represents an ‘ecological conversion’ which, in recent decades, has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe towards which it has been heading. However, whilst this renewed emphasis is important, we are also conscious that we are drafting this document at a time when there is war in Europe and elsewhere. War is catastrophic for the natural environment and diverts political energies. As Pope Francis noted prophetically in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, published in October 2020, quoting an address to the members of the General Assembly of the United Nations:

‘Since conditions that favour the outbreak of wars are once again increasing, I can only reiterate that war is the negation of all rights and a dramatic assault on the environment. If we want true integral human development for all, we must work tirelessly to avoid war between nations and peoples. To this end, there is a need to ensure the uncontested rule of law and tireless recourse to negotiation, mediation and arbitration, as proposed by the Charter of the United Nations, which constitutes truly a fundamental juridical norm.’<sup>25</sup>

The publication of *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis has led to many fruits and there is a greater sense of responsibility for the natural environment amongst individuals, in civil society, and in politics. This includes action being taken at many levels by young people. However, without a real conversion that ensures that changing moral attitudes are reflected in behaviour so that we have lifestyles that focus on ‘being’ rather than ‘having’, the tide will not be turned.

# IV. Rediscovering Moral and Scriptural Foundations

Responses to the environmental crisis draw on our own moral and religious foundations.



Christians see the world through the lens of faith. Our responses to the environmental crisis will therefore draw on our own moral and religious foundations, as well as on other rich traditions of faith.

## Creation has value in itself

We believe that God is the Creator of everything there is, and that this creation is good, reflecting God's own goodness (*Genesis 1-2*). Each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection. For each one of the works of the six days of creation it is said: 'And God saw that it was good' (*Genesis 1:10*). As is stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

'By the very nature of creation, material being is endowed with its own stability, truth and excellence, its own order and laws. Each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects in its own way a ray of God's infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment' (CCC, §339).

God loves creation for its own sake, and God's love holds everything in existence for its own mysterious purpose (*Psalms 104:29-30*). Creation has its own relationship with God, in some measure independently of humankind and beyond human understanding: it glorifies and worships God in continuous praise (*Psalms 96:12; Isaiah 55:12*). While our destructiveness can silence creation's song of praise to God, our care for creation can be a true expression of our own praise. Such a perspective challenges narrow materialistic and utilitarian views that the gifts of creation only have value as a 'factor of production'.

## Creation has value because it reveals God

The Creator's 'eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made' (*Romans 1:20*). Nature reveals God to us and allows us to experience God's presence. For example, people of faith have testified that nature's abundance and beauty reveals God's generosity and majesty, its healing, nourishing, and life-giving properties reveal divine reconciling love. In the thirteenth century, St Thomas Aquinas argued that the diversity of the extraordinary array of creatures roaming the earth revealed the richness of the nature of God:

'And because one single creature was not enough, he produced many diverse creatures, so that what was wanting in one expression of the

divine goodness might be supplied by another; for goodness, which in God is single and all together, in creatures is multiple and scattered. Hence the whole universe less incompletely than one alone shares and represents his goodness.'<sup>26</sup>

When we allow creation to be degraded and damaged, therefore, we lose our sense of God's very self.

Jesus points to the lilies of the field and the birds of the air as beautiful and of value in their own right ('Not even Solomon in all his royal robes was clothed like one of these'), but also as revealing the care of God for all beings (*Matthew 6:26-30*), a care that can liberate us from the kind of anxiety that deflects us from seeking God's kingdom first. His authority over the immense power of the sea awes the disciples who experience it, because it is only God who has sovereignty over the forces of Creation.

## Human beings are dependent but responsible

Human beings are created in the image of God (*Genesis 1:27*). We are at the pinnacle of creation. However, though we have been given dominion over the earth, this does not mean that we should exercise absolute domination over all creatures because 'we are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us' (*Laudato Si*, §67). Indeed, we have the special gift and responsibility of sharing in God's creative activity,

as well as caring for what God has created. We use, and by using we transform, the natural world. As ‘co-creators’, then, our acts should reflect God’s own loving care for creation.

Pope Francis reminds us that we are made up of the elements of the earth and that ‘we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters’ (*Laudato Si*, §2). We are therefore dependent on the rest of creation for our continued existence. We are made aware that caring for creation is part of caring for ourselves (*Genesis 2:15*). There is a covenant of mutual care and respect that unites God, humankind and every other living creature (*Genesis 9*).

## Ecological sin and the importance of “human ecology”

Our capacity to marvel at the earth, but also to develop and use its resources (for instance through the application of science and technology), has greatly enriched our lives. This human creativity carries with it a profound responsibility. As Pope John Paul II wrote:

‘Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though the earth did not have its own requisites and a prior, God-given purpose, which man indeed can develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with

God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up in provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannised than governed by him.’<sup>27</sup>

It is part of Christian faith to recognise that we are sinners: in our present context, this truth means that sin has distorted the human relationship with the natural world. Pope Francis referred to this as ‘ecological sin’. Specifically, he has suggested that ecological sin is ‘an action or omission against God, against one’s neighbour, the community and the environment. It is a sin against future generations and is manifested in acts and habits of pollution and destruction of the harmony of the environment, in transgressions against the principles of interdependence and in the breaking of networks of solidarity between creatures.’<sup>28</sup>

Sin damages our relationships with God and with one another, the relationships between social groups, and that between humanity and the earth. As the prophets of the Old Testament testify, such sin is reflected in the earth’s suffering: ‘The earth dries up and withers, the world languishes and withers; the heavens languish together with the earth. The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants; for they have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant’ (*Isaiah 24:4-5*). ‘Therefore,

the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing' (*Hosea 4:2-3*).

We must avoid the temptation of assuming that environmental challenges will be avoided by the development of technology so that our behaviour is excused. We must also be aware of the relationship between what Pope John Paul II described as "human ecology" and caring for our common home.

It makes no sense to care about the natural environment whilst not respecting life from conception until natural death or using invasive technology to interfere in the process of conception. Pope Benedict wrote about this in his letter *Caritas in Veritate*:

'If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our

educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible' (*Caritas in Veritate*, §51).

## Creation participates in our redemption

We live out our relationship with God as dwellers on the earth. Our use of the gifts of creation forms part of that relationship. To love God is, among other things, to give thanks and praise for these gifts, to honour and respect them for themselves, to acknowledge that they are destined by God for all people, and therefore to share the gifts of the earth justly. God constantly and lovingly calls us back from sin to repentance and conversion. In thinking of our common home, the earth, we can say that the antidote to the sin of exploitative greed and to a culture of indifference to the needs of others is found in the virtues of care, respect and temperance. It is partly in this sense that St Paul daringly argues that the earth itself shares in our redemption and salvation:

'For the creation waits in eager expectation... that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.'<sup>29</sup>





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**If we learn how to listen, we can hear in the voice of creation a kind of dissonance. On the one hand, we can hear a sweet song in praise of our beloved Creator; on the other, an anguished plea, lamenting our mistreatment of this our common home.**

Pope Francis, World Day of Prayer  
for the Care of Creation, 2022

# V. Responding to the Cry of Creation

The cry of creation prompts us all to ask, 'What then should we do?' (*Luke 3:10*).



The cry of creation prompts us all to ask, 'What then should we do?' (*Luke 3:10*). What is needed is a response to the call for solidarity. This is 'not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the hardships of many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit ourselves to the common good: that is to say to the good of all and of each individual because we really are responsible for all.'<sup>30</sup> Solidarity is a virtue that should be exercised by each and every individual and be embedded in all institutions in society. Never has there been greater need for the exercise of solidarity than when it comes to dealing with the ecological crisis.

## Education towards ecological responsibility

It is encouraging to note that environmental awareness now plays a greater part in formal education, but it is important that this education enables people to take up their personal responsibilities. Education that focuses solely on the elements of science and technology cannot offer a framework of moral values that is necessary to guide the many decisions we each make in our daily lives. We need formation and education that helps liberate people from enslavement



to a way of life that values consumption, convenience, wealth, status, and economic growth above living a life that is rightly ordered towards God. Such a formation and education frees people from a life orientated towards consumption and enables them to make different choices that will lead to systemic change.

‘Education in environmental responsibility can encourage ways of acting which directly and significantly affect the world around us, such as avoiding the use of plastic and paper, reducing water consumption, separating refuse, cooking only what can reasonably be consumed, showing care for other living beings, using public transport or car-pooling, planting trees, turning off unnecessary lights, or any number of other practices. All of these reflect a generous and worthy creativity which brings out the best in human beings. Reusing something instead of immediately discarding it, when done for the right reasons, can be an act of love which expresses our own dignity’ (*Laudato Si*, §211). Such education should take place in schools, families, and seminaries, and it should involve education in aesthetics so that people are better able to appreciate lasting things of beauty rather than what is simply disposable and temporary.

### **Personal responsibility and conversion of life**

It is tempting to think that environmental problems are so enormous in nature that we cannot make any difference ourselves and that we should leave it to governments to solve. That is not the view of Pope Francis who endorsed the view of the Australian bishops that ‘we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart’ (*Laudato Si*, §218). He preceded this by noting: ‘We must not think that these efforts are not going to change the world. They benefit society, often unbeknown to us, for they call forth a goodness which, albeit unseen, inevitably tends to spread. Furthermore, such actions can restore our sense of self-esteem; they can enable us to live more fully and to feel that life on earth is worthwhile’ (*Laudato Si*, §212). In other words, our individual actions are not only important in themselves: they help promote a change in culture.

In our personal lives, we need a fundamentally new orientation towards the purpose of material possessions.

‘It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards “having” rather than “being”, and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself.’<sup>31</sup>

All religious traditions encourage simplicity of life, often even a certain austerity. In the Christian tradition, this wisdom derives from the Lord’s own profound saying, ‘Where your treasure is, there will your heart be too’ (*Matthew 6:21*). The desire for affluence, for more and more possessions, for almost anything new, can begin to dominate us. In a consumerist age, the pressure exerted on us by advertising and by the visibility of luxury goods all around us encourages the assumption that it is our right to use the gifts of creation entirely as we wish. It will require continuing reflection about how our habits of life can all too easily become excessive and wasteful, and how they affect the well-being of others, to counter these pressures. Nevertheless, to do so is a way of co-operating with Christ’s mission to bring reconciliation and peace, and indeed can truly be a way of learning afresh to love God and our neighbour.

### **Acting in partnership: Other Churches and faiths**

Many different groups are to be found where people come together to support and encourage each other towards environmental justice. Amongst these are numerous church-linked programmes and activities. Christians of different denominations can work together at parish level and nationally. Opportunities also exist to work with other world faiths, not least Judaism and Islam, which share our belief in God, the loving Creator of all that is. The importance of this dialogue should not be understated.

### **Acting in partnership: Civil and political structures**

Environmental problems cross state boundaries, and global warming is an international problem with no boundaries at all. Because of this, governments need to work through international structures. Countries at the recent COP26 meeting in Glasgow, for example, agreed to take a range of actions including setting timetables to reduce carbon and methane emissions. They also adopted policies to end and reverse deforestation and land degradation. An earlier COP meeting, in Paris in 2015, adopted a commitment to keep warming well below 2°C and



pursue efforts to ensure it was limited to 1.5°C. It is important that governments work together within these structures and implement the agreements that are made through them. In turn, electorates should hold their governments to account for the promises that have been made. Governments have often signed international agreements to take action on the environment under strong pressure from civil society. The active support and co-operation of all sectors of society make real change possible. But such results can only be achieved if electors are willing to let go of the relentless search for the maximisation of consumption, and opposition political parties, as well as governments, refuse to allow the search for short-term political gain to block the necessary measures.

There is a special responsibility on the governments of rich countries and hence on their populations. Pope Francis has called for richer countries to significantly reduce consumption of non-renewable energy and to support programmes of sustainable development in poorer countries (*Laudato Si*, §52). Although all countries will have to reduce carbon emissions below those which might have been expected given their projected levels of economic growth, developing countries cannot be expected to forego their own economic progress so that the rich can exploit the earth's resources unchallenged. 'We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalisation of indifference' (*Laudato Si*, §52).

Ultimately, all countries need to find ways to revise the meaning of "progress" and "growth" so that progress towards human flourishing and a healthy planet are not in conflict.

## Acting together in solidarity

*The Call of Creation* was originally written in 2002 in advance of the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development. Kofi Annan, the then Secretary General of the United Nations, called for a strengthened balance between nature and the human economy, a recognition of common but differentiated responsibilities, and a plea for a response as a single human community. *The Call of Creation* further recognised the challenges that climate change creates for politics and the way we live our lives as individuals. It is of great concern that the challenges in this area are even more stark today.

In the wake of the COP 26 in Glasgow, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales wish to express their solidarity with the international community.

Summits such as COP provide the opportunity for every form of social organisation to work together: international institutions, governments, non-governmental organisations, business leaders, scientists, and so on. 'In an increasingly global society, the unit of human community to which the term "common good" applies moves from the national to the international level. Hence solidarity has an inescapable universal dimension. Solidarity requires action to protect the common good at this level, where it can only be safeguarded by the collaboration of all.'<sup>32</sup>

However, the exercise of the virtue of solidarity and the promotion of the common good are the responsibility of each and every Individual and institution in society. We must all learn to respect nature in ways that are consistent with its God-given laws. Individual choices can seem insignificant when faced with such global challenges. But, as is noted above, Pope Francis has rightly stated that multiplied individual actions can indeed make a real difference. At parish, diocesan, and national level, the Church must play its part. This involves taking action to reduce carbon emissions as well as to prevent the loss of biodiversity, whilst helping our parishioners understand the importance of caring for our common home. We must take similar actions within our Catholic schools.

The COP 26 summit must not be allowed to fail through governments' refusal to take decisive action because they think public opinion is against them. Faith groups have the specific task of communicating to their governments the spiritual and moral foundations of sustainable living and development. Catholics in local government should propose actions that are both appropriate to the local situation and will contribute to resolving wider global problems. This applies to actions designed to reduce carbon emissions as well as to the promotion of bio-diversity and other environmental objectives.

# VI. Conclusion

We must respond as Christians, considering how we live our lives so that we are good stewards of our fragile planet.

Christians, particularly perhaps Catholic Christians, are reminded of the precious gifts of creation at each Eucharistic celebration. In the ancient prayer over the gifts of bread and wine, we praise God our Creator and remember that these material goods are given to us by God and are fashioned through the co-operation of Creator and creature: so, our own daily living is to reflect our gratitude for the gifts that have been given to us. Again, in the Eucharist we join in the self-giving, the sacrifice, of Christ himself, and in this sense the offering of our own lives – time, convenience, money – for the good of others can itself be Eucharistic, a ‘sacrifice’ for them. In the Eucharist we, the priestly people, the Church, are empowered to transform and use what we have been given. This act of transformation is a sacred act. But it is for all, to nourish all, for the life and salvation of all.

Our Sister, Mother Earth ‘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’ (*Laudato Si*, §2). We must respond as Christians to the cry of creation and think hard about how we live our lives so that we are good stewards of our fragile planet and live in solidarity with the world’s poorest communities. We must face this challenge with confidence in the knowledge that the worst effects of this ecological crisis can still be avoided. 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.

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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