

Polish Bishops' Conference

Pastoral Letter on Environmental Protection (May 2, 1989)

Purpose of the letter

The sense of the threat that is being increasingly felt today as a result of the devastation of the environment in which we live, raises widespread concern. The Church is invariably deeply interested in human affairs, and more so, it wishes to be directly engaged in them. The anxiety of man is the anxiety of the Church. This is what prompts us today to raise the complex and difficult issue of ecology.

We address our pastoral word to believers and all people of good will, because the matter concerns us all and it is of extreme importance and urgency. It is of importance, because it relates to the very foundations of our existence, our Polish Home, as well as our health and life, and of urgency, because there are dangerous cracks appearing in this plane which in consequence may lead to the destruction of the very bases of our nation's existence. The present situation is not infrequently referred to as crisis or even as an ecological disaster.

Poland's ecological situation

According to official data, 27 regions of Poland have been identified as environmentally endangered. Those regions constitute the area of 35.2 thousand km² and they are inhabited by 12.9 million people, i.e. 1/3 of the Nation. Let us mention here just a few: the region of Legnica and Głogów, Bełchatów, Gdańsk, Kraków, Tarnobrzeg and others. It should be highlighted that the most difficult situation prevails in the Upper Silesian Industrial District, where 8.1% of people

exposed to poisonous fumes of concentrated industry inhabit a small area constituting only 1% of the whole country. Inhabitants of this region, especially children, show an increased tendency to suffer from diseases or premature death. Rapid exploitation of coal is leading to the collapse of entire cities. This is a situation which is unique on the world's scale. It must be added that the alarming environmental condition in Silesia affects the whole country.

The poor state of the environment in Poland is caused by air, water and soil pollution. As a result, forests are dying, and national parks are perishing. Many spas are losing their character of health resorts regenerating human strength. We are losing the Baltic coast and the lake regions, i.e. places for recreation and rest. Monuments of the national culture with historical Krakow at the forefront, are eroding. The landscape is littered by random architectural solutions. The majority of produced food fails to meet the required quality standards. Water deficit is being increasingly felt.

The above are the merely signalled threats endangering humanity, endangering the human basic right to live in a healthy environment.

Moral dimension of the problem

Each form of human activity as the activity of a responsible being, has a moral dimension. Degradation of the environment affects the good of creation given to man by God the Creator as an indispensable element of his life and development. People are

obliged to use this gift properly in the spirit of gratitude and respect. On the other hand, the awareness that this gift is intended for all people, that it constitutes a common good, is also a source of a proper sense of obligation towards another person. Consequently, it must be acknowledged that all actions that do not take into account God's right to His work, or the right of man endowed by Him with creation stand in contradiction to the commandment of love. The above brings to light a deep moral dimension of the problem, and the above-presented factual situation forces us to judge human action in terms of guilt. It is, therefore, necessary to realize that our consciences are burdened with a grave sin against the natural environment making us accountable towards God the Creator.

Sources of evil

In order to remedy the situation, it is necessary to get to the root of evil. It can be traced back to man himself and to the sinful structures of which he is the creator. It is worth referring here to the teaching contained in the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis* of the Holy Father, John Paul II. The Pope points out that "among the actions and attitudes opposed to the will of God, the good of neighbour and the 'structures' created by them, two are very typical: on the one hand, the all-consuming desire for profit, and on the other, the thirst for power, with the intention of imposing one's will upon others. In order to characterize better each of these attitudes, one can add the expression: 'at any price.'" (No. 37). It is that very attitude focused on possessing more and more goods that evokes in man selfishness contrary to love and leading to neglecting the rights or needs of others. It seems quite evident that with such an attitude, the spiritual aspect of man is lost, and material goods are practically considered to be the only ones.

Economic activities, often inspired by political or ideological motives, resulted in the fact that the present economic model of Poland is not adapted to the natural

conditions of our country. The ill-considered construction of giant industrial centres presented an immense burden for the environment far exceeding its capability to cope with it. Production at any price became the main motto of industrial activity. And even if the motives behind such initiatives were noble, it was the human reason which failed by ignoring the truth that when the environment is heavily burdened, the negative effects will outweigh the intended good. The imposed economic and social structures paralyzing the society's activity led to the situation in which that society was unable to take effective action even in the area of saving the endangered environment. At the same time, the irrational exploitation of our raw material resources and their wasteful economy do not seem to take into account the needs of future generations.

How true seem the words of the already quoted encyclical: "hidden behind certain decisions, apparently inspired only by economics or politics, are real forms of idolatry: of money, ideology, class, technology" (no. 37).

Circles of responsibility

The above considerations indicate that we are dealing with a serious problem having moral dimension and calling for human internal transformation. Its essentiality should be acknowledged also by those who do not act according to religious motivation.

Responsibility for the state of the environment rests on the whole society and on all organs of power, and the degree of this responsibility is defined by the possibilities to undertake action on the part of each body or social group, i.e., on individual persons.

The Church also takes upon itself this responsibility by fulfilling the mission of proclaiming moral principles and by educating personal consciences in this respect. The Church refers back to its historical tradition, reminding of such great figures as St. Francis of Assisi, for whom all animate and inanimate elements of nature were more like brothers and sisters than

things or beings that could be freely used. A deep sense of respect for all creation, behind which the Saint could discern God the Creator, constitutes a thoroughly ethical value that is worth imitating today. In the breve *Inter sanctos* proclaiming St. Francis, the patron saint of ecologists, the Holy Father, John Paul II says: "Among the holy and admirable men who have revered nature as a wonderful gift of God to the human race, St. Francis of Assisi deserves special consideration, for he, in a special way, deeply sensed the universal works of the Creator and, filled with a certain divine spirit, sang that very beautiful 'Canticle of the Creatures.' Through them, Brother Sun most powerful and Sister Moon and the stars of heaven, he offered fitting praise, glory, honour and all blessing to the most high, all-powerful, good Lord..."

Towards a better future

The alarming ecological situation should prompt us to undertake a national examination of conscience and revision of life. It is only through recognizing evil and acknowledging the guilt that proper action can be initiated. We face the necessity of changing our ecological thinking and actions, of "transformation of consciences" – as the Holy Father will put it, in order to be more solidary towards man and nature. This internal transformation can prepare the ground for sacrifices that are inevitable to improve the ecological situation.

Each country has its own ecological conditionings as well as its own historical experiences on the path of development. The direction of economic development that Poland has chosen does not harmonize with natural conditions. Therefore, it is necessary to appeal for the right directions of development, which requires changing the industrial variant of the country's development and abandoning further development of heavy industry. It is this industry that by being highly energy-intensive, consumes huge amounts of natural resources and imposes the greatest

burden on the environment. The existing industry must be brought by all accessible and extraordinary measures to the state in which natural resources would be used in a safe and economical way, or otherwise it should be consistently eliminated.

In the face of emerging technologies of nuclear energy, we must once again carefully consider whether it is really indispensable for us, and, most importantly, whether we are able to master this technology in such a way as to protect the country from the risk of potential contamination known to us from the recent past. The public's fears and protests in this matter deserve full attention and respect of the authorities, as well as a real dialogue based on concern for the future, general good and security.

It is also important to treat all economic entities as having their share in environmental pollution on equal terms. The fact of adopting a different policy of enforcing environmental protection principles towards small and private businesses than towards large state enterprises, gives rise to a sense of social injustice.

Polluters should be obliged to use environmental protection devices and the authorities should consistently enforce on them obligations or apply towards them criminal sanctions. On the other hand, economic facilities of high and irremovable noxiousness should be consequently and decisively closed down. At the same time, new investments should become subject of independent, matter-of-fact specialist expertise.

The Church also wishes to take a stance to the well-known fact that ecological problems in Europe have become a common matter of states and nations since the atmospheric and water pollution is spreading across borders. The south-western region of Poland has been contaminated by the activities of our southern and western neighbours rather than by domestic industry. Consequently, it seems expedient to ensure that adequate international agreements are signed to protect our country against pollution.

The Church calls for effective international cooperation to combat this evil and it is ready to support such cooperation with its own authority and practical action according to its means.

New ecological thinking should permeate the activity of all management levels and organization of the economy, from workers operating the simplest devices or entering the construction site, through the company management, to the bodies that decide on further development directions.

Conclusion

We share with you, Brothers and Sisters, our concerns caused by a bad ecological situation. We appeal to all those responsible for the state of the environment to act in the name of the common good and make decisions which could stop the dramatic process of nature's degradation and initiate its gradual reconstruction.

However, we can all make efforts within the so-called "small ecology". All of us can decide individually in what condition we will leave the places of rest, whether it will be necessary to undertake initiatives to collect garbage in the mountains and forests.

Raise your children from their first years in the spirit of respect for nature, teach

them how to discover the beauty that God encapsulated in nature. Take care of the greenery around your houses and apartments, protect it from vandals that destroy everything green. Poland cannot become one big dustbin. There is beauty in it that needs to be discovered and protected.

We bless everyone undertaking the effort to protect and properly shape the environment, our common good. We bless you with all our heart.

Jasna Góra Monastery, 2 May 1989

Signed by:

Cardinals, archbishops and bishops present at the 234th Plenary Assembly of the Polish Bishops' Conference.

Ordinance: The Pastoral Letter of Polish Bishops on Environmental Protection should be read during the Mass on Sunday, June 11, 1989.

Source: Salesian Archives of the Pila Province, Polish Episcopate, files without reference number.