

Ecological Concerns in a Modern Presentation of the Mystery of Creation

JOSELITO ALVIAR

Concern for ecology is one of the signs of our times. Man, through scientific and technological progress, has rendered himself capable of transforming his habitat to a degree hitherto unimaginable. He has to become, not just one more species inhabiting the earth, but rather one that consciously and decisively determines the planet's fate (for good or bad). The perception of the magnitude and depth of impact on the world has led man to appreciate more keenly his relatedness to nature, and to become wary of his cumulative effect upon it. That, essentially, is what ecological concern is all about.

This concern, though having its origin in highly industrialized nations, has reached other areas of the globe as well, particularly those countries which, like the Philippines, have a plethora of natural resources in danger of depletion. It is not surprising that the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines [PCP-II] should include a section on ecology in its final *Decree*, stating: "The Church, through the initiatives of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines [CBCP], should develop a comprehensive theology of stewardship and, in the light of this theology, should make ecology a special concern of the social action apostolate down to the parochial level, with the end in view of making everyone a true steward of God's creation."¹

In these brief but pithy lines the PCP II maps out not just a course of pastoral action, but also a trajectory for theological reflec-

¹ Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, *Decree*, Article 32, #1.

tion. Indeed, effective solutions to the ecological problem may be achieved only if the question is analyzed down to its deepest roots. That means taking into account a number of facts about the cosmos, man, and history, which are told us by Revelation: particularly, the divine origin of man and the world; the specific role of man in the universe; and the historical facts of sin and redemption. Only when these truths are taken into account may a comprehensive answer to the ecological problem be formulated. The solution cannot consist in a purely technological measure; it will, as we shall see, necessarily imply a moral effort.

It is the purpose of the present article, following the idea of PCP II, to suggest a basic theological framework for reflection on the ecological issue. A suitable context for such reflection, we believe, is offered by the Christian doctrine on creation.

A Christian View of Nature

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."² This rotund, opening affirmation of the Bible immediately situates the world, together with man, within a fundamental theological context, which the sacred books will describe with progressive richness. Scripture decidedly declares the creatural, contingent character of all finite being: everything that exists outside of God has been drawn by Him from absolute nothingness, through a divine act of wisdom, power and goodness. This vision of the world's origin is far removed from other, non-Christian views which, awed by the cosmic mystery, assign to the universe a divine nature: this "All" must be God himself, they think (pantheism); or is an effusion of the divine substance (emanatism); in any case, to the whole or its parts religious veneration and cult are due. (Elements of this cosmic-religious tendency survive even in our day in the New Age Movement, in which — as Pope John Paul II reminded U.S. Bishops in a 1993 discourse — the idea of personal responsibility before God is displaced by a vague sense of duty towards the cosmos³). The revealed datum de-divinizes and de-mythologizes the universe, by uncovering, underneath its impressive vastness and apparent solidity, an original, yawning abyss of "nothingness."

² Gen 1:1.

³ John Paul II, Discourse of May 28, 1993.

At the same time, revelation tells man that he cannot despise the world. He should, in fact, adopt an attitude of wonder before the handiwork of God. The disposition of reverent contemplation is expressed in Psalms like 18, 103, and 148, and has been deeply felt by Christians such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Philip Neri. This attitude implies a special type of wonder and awe, for it does not imply subjugation to a "deified" cosmos but rather loving respect towards a Creator's masterpiece.

"God saw all the things that he made, and they were very good."⁴ The human being, before a universe filled with marvellous laws, cannot but feel himself inclined to share in this first, primordial, positive glance of creation. He is led to value his world as one gifted with consistency and meaning, and consequently as a reality worthy of respect and study.⁵ He cannot simply reject the created universe as an enemy or obstacle in his search for God (as some excessively "spiritualistic" minds might think), nor as something wholly devoid of interest; on the contrary: the cosmos, with its myriad vestiges of a Maker, validly appears as a place of possible encounter with God.⁶

The Christian faith sees through the cosmos, to a transcendent Being, to which all creation is linked by causal bonds of power, intelligence, and love. Such a view is far removed from the secularized visions of the universe, which conceive it as some sort of rootless and drifting "orphan", a thing without origin, course, or destiny. It may be eternal, some way — but belongs to no One ... Perhaps it did begin in time, with a bang (or oscillates eternally between the states of nothingness and somethingness) — but has no Author nor Cause... In any case, a desolate picture.

Man's Role in the Universe

The human being, an integral part of the universe, is a creature, too, and shares the experience of fragility with the rest of beings. Revelation, however, tells him that he holds a special place within the whole, and that he must fulfill a specific function in the universe.

⁴ Gen 1, 31.

⁵ Vatican Council II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 36.

⁶ *Ibidem*, no. 15.

The first chapter of Genesis narrates a progressive sequence, wherein creatures appear in "ascending" order. Man's apparition is situated in the last (sixth) day of the creation account, and is portrayed as the climactic moment of the sequence. The human being is created by God according to His "image and likeness,"⁷ and receives this mandate: "Increase and multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it."⁸

The creation of man thus appears in continuity with that of the rest of creatures; but this peculiar creation account indicates that the human being cannot be considered as simply and wholly "homogeneous" with the rest of creation.⁹ He, and only he (a "person"), enjoys special reference to the Maker. This perspective differentiates the Christian faith from other anthropological conceptions, which count man as simply one more animal (more developed, certainly); or which reclaim animal rights equal to (or even greater than) those of men.

The narrative of the creation of man and woman in the second chapter of Genesis likewise contains an indication of the human being's privileged place and role within creation. It states that Yahweh "put man into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it, and to keep it,"¹⁰ and that He presented all the animals to man "to see what he would call them."¹¹ This double biblical expression of man's unique grasp and control of the reality that surrounds him indicates that the Creator has bestowed upon man an ontological and functional superiority over all creatures.

Now, the dominion that God expects man to exercise over the universe is of a specific kind, which has been felicitously defined as a "stewardship":

1) It does not mean absolute dominion, since man is not the radical Source of things. He must consider the world as a gift, entrusted by God to his care. He is under obligation to employ that gift

⁷ Gen 1:26.

⁸ Gen 1:28.

⁹ Vatican Council II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 14.

¹⁰ Gen 2:15.

¹¹ Gen 2:19.

correctly, in accord with the Giver's will. Thus man, created according to the divine likeness, should act as God's representative. He cannot dispose of creation in an irresponsible, arbitrary, or despotic manner (for example by unleashing effects so deleterious upon the environment as the massive release of toxic wastes, or the wanton exploitation of irreplaceable natural resources).

2) Man's dominion over created beings cannot constitute a wholly autonomous activity, "subtracted" from God's sphere (as deists and philosophers of the Enlightenment might suggest). Neither man nor world may be conceived in absolute independence from the Maker. (God himself does not forget about his handiwork, but rather constantly unfolds his loving designs for creature's bliss). The practical consequence of this is plain: man's action upon nature must assume the forms of subordination to God's design and cooperation with His creative action.

3) Dominion and power over the rest of creatures may be conceived, besides, from the perspective of man as "priest of all creation."¹² The material universe achieves its culmination in the human being, and through him finds a voice to praise its Creator freely.¹³ Man has the mission of so ordering nature that it may fulfill its primordial function of manifesting the divine perfections. Incorporating the cosmos in his own adoration and praise, man elevates it above itself and lets the universe render God a glory which, alone, it cannot give.

It becomes clear from the foregoing exposition, that the Christian doctrine on creation provides with a basic orientation as to the noble part he must play in the cosmos, and at the same time indicates limits to his dominion over nature.

Disruption of Sin; Restoration in Christ

Revelation supplies one more relevant datum, namely sin's entry into human history. Man, in breaking his friendship with God, has introduced a lack of harmony, both within himself and in his relations with other creatures. It is now difficult for him to handle

¹² Pope John Paul, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, chapter 2.

¹³ Vatican Council II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 14.

creatures with total rectitude of intention and respect for God's plans. The whole of creation, according to St. Paul, is subject to vanity, and groans and travails in birth-pangs awaiting the manifestation of the children of God.¹⁴ "If man is not at peace with God, neither will the world itself be at peace."¹⁵

It does not require much effort to perceive the disorder which man, through his moral deviations, has introduced into his environment: destruction of natural habitats, disappearance of species, depletion of forests, etc. Behind such tragedies often lie selfish motives and disordered interests, which give higher priority to economic or power gains, over the good of persons or of nature; which prefer immediate personal profit to the common good. This realistic picture, of man as sinner, leads away from ingenuously optimistic conceptions of man, such as J.J. Rousseau's naturalism. The Christian warns us that man in his historical situation suffers the debilitating effects of sin, and cannot exercise his dominion over creatures without previously achieving dominion within himself. Though he conserves his affinity for truth and good, he simultaneously feels in his flesh the gravity-like pull of egoism, hedonism, greed, which render arduous any moderate and reasonable behavior in using earthly goods.

Christian revelation adds a final, hopeful datum, however, by affirming that salvation has come to us through Christ. It is possible to overcome sin and human frailty, and shape the world in accordance with the divine project. All things, in heaven and on earth, have been reconciled through Christ, pacified with the blood of his Cross.¹⁶ Christ has become the head of all¹⁷; the world, ruled previously by sin and death, has with Him begun the path towards definitive renewal.¹⁸ Time's end will bring, not annihilation, but a renovation which will yield "a new heaven and a new earth"¹⁹ — a divine transformation of the world as we know it into a fitting dwell-

¹⁴ Rom 8:19-21.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Message for the World Peace Day* (1990).

¹⁶ Col 1:19-20.

¹⁷ Eph 1:10.

¹⁸ Rom 8:21.

¹⁹ Apoc 21:1.

ing place for saints, resurrected and gathered complete around Christ.

Within this eschatologically-charged picture, man's actual efforts to better the world and fashion it into a place worthy of human dignity are relevant.²⁰ Humanity's noble, hard-won gains in the actual stage of salvation history will not be swept away in the end, but will rather be conserved, purified, eternalized, at the final consummation.

The Moral Demands of Ecology

It will be perceived, from the foregoing discussion, that the ecological challenge in the fact achieves a plane deeper than that of empirical science and technology: It reaches down to man's on heart. A completely satisfactory response to the ecological challenge, therefore, cannot limit itself limited to technical solutions. It should address itself to the principal actor of the drama, which is the human being. Any effective, coordinated activity among individuals, companies, or nations to care better for the environment demands, in the final analysis, a conversion in the depths of men's hearts. "The use of mineral, plant, and animals resources of the universe cannot be separated from the respect of moral exigencies."²¹ "The ecological crisis is a moral problem."²²

A change of heart and mind are therefore necessary. Particularly needful are: 1) the return to a faith-filled vision of creation, which values the world as a divine gift, and acknowledges man's responsibility as steward over it; 2) the hope-filled conviction that humanity, in its struggle to fashion the fashion the world according to God's designs, is helped by divine providence and grace; 3) an education of citizens' moral sense, not only in individual freedom but also in personal responsibility and commitment to the common good; 4) the practice of a wider from of solidarity, which assumes the common task of administering the world's resources for the benefit of both present and future generations; 5) a change in lifestyle²³

²⁰ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 39.

²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2415.

²² Pope John Paul II, *Message for the World Peace Day* (1990).

²³ *Ibidem*.

which, in the face of modern-day temptations of hedonism, greed, and consumerism, rediscovers the values of temperance, detachment, and sacrifice.

The first point listed above might be accomplished to an important degree if the inculcation of ecological awareness were incorporated among the goals for catechetical instruction on creation. The remaining four points, of a particular import, represent a pastoral challenge —that of undertaking a deeper moral formation of Christians, particularly laymen, whose vocation consists in seeking the Kingdom of God in and through their involvement in the world.²⁴

* * * *

The considerations we have enumerated in this article are basic and general, but sufficient to show the theological moorings and moral exigencies of the ecological challenge. Hopefully, such ideas will guide us so that we, rather than endangering the survival of species (including our own), may work the world's transformation, in accordance with the creator's wise plans. □

²⁴ Vatican Council II, Dogm. Const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 32.