

# WHAT WILL BE OUR LEGACY TO OUR CHILDREN?

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Earth, Water, Air and Fire – these are all necessary elements in sustaining life. At the same time, they can destroy life through earthquakes and landslides, floods, pollution, and forest fires. Some of these may be considered as natural disasters (or, as insurance companies might put it, ‘acts of God’ – blaming it on Someone who cannot answer back).

While it is true that the earth’s climate can vary because of the way the way the ocean and the atmosphere interact with each other, or through changes in the Earth's orbit, or because of changes in energy received from the sun, there is now very strong evidence and almost universal agreement that significant recent global warming cannot be explained just by natural causes. The changes seen over recent years, and those predicted for the next century, are considered to be mainly the result of human behaviour that creates emissions of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane. Air pollution, too, is seen as the result of human activity, such as manufacturing and mining, burning fossil fuels, using pesticides and fertilisers, and increased car ownership.

There is now very strong evidence that people are changing the climate with actions. Some of the figures are quite startling. While it is the case that statistics can be misleading and have to be read with a degree of caution, it is clear that some countries produce more in terms of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions per head of population. One report from the International Energy Agency<sup>1</sup> shows that while many countries on the African continent produce far fewer emissions (Kenya 0.3; Nigeria 0.35; Togo 0.14; Zambia 0.2) as do many Central and Latin American countries (Brazil 1.81; El Salvador 0.91; Peru 1.09; Uruguay 1.73), there are others in Europe which produce more (UK 8.6)<sup>2</sup>, while the ‘New World’ countries of Canada, Australia and the US produce considerably more (17.37, 18.75 and 19.1 respectively). Surprisingly, perhaps, among the worst offenders (if we may use that term) are the United Arab Emirates (29.9) and Qatar (58.01). Less surprising is the increase in emissions by emerging economies such as China, India, Indonesia and Brazil<sup>3</sup>, though at least one of these, China (the leading polluter), is taking steps to begin to address the issue.<sup>4</sup>

There is very strong evidence that people are changing the climate with actions that create emissions of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide and methane. There are some surprising facts. For example, in the United Kingdom, the emission of greenhouse gases comes from a number of sources: 65 per cent from burning fuel to create energy (excluding transport); 21 per cent from

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<sup>1</sup> International Energy Agency: CO2 Emissions for Fuel Combustion 2009; CO2 Emissions/Population 2007, [http://www.iea.org/Textbase/publications/free\\_new\\_Desc.asp?PUBS\\_ID=2143](http://www.iea.org/Textbase/publications/free_new_Desc.asp?PUBS_ID=2143) (accessed 12 June 2012).

<sup>2</sup> See Department of Energy and Climate Change, *2011 UK GHG Emissions Report*, 29 March 2012, <http://www.decc.gov.uk/assets/decc/11/stats.clim> (accessed 15 June 2012) which reports that in 2010, of end-user greenhouse gas emissions, 31% related to business, 27% to residential users, and 24% to transport.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Emerging Powers Press Rich World on CO2 Cuts’, AFP, 26 August 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews.afp> (accessed 14 June 2012).

<sup>4</sup> ‘China Passes New Proposal to Control Greenhouse Gas Emissions’, 10 November 2011, <http://www/2point6billion.com/news/2011/11/1/> (accessed 14 June 2012).

transport; around 8 per cent from agriculture – mainly nitrous oxide from nitrogen fertilisers or methane given off by animals and manure; and 4 per cent from industry such as manufacturing. Individuals account for about 40 per cent of emissions, from heating the home, powering appliances, driving and air travel.

There are many complex questions to address. Energy is needed to run factories, schools, hospitals, community centres and offices. Even if it were possible to regress to an agricultural economy in the UK, or to curtail industrial activity, there is a question of whether we are able or willing to do this, and whether this can be demanded of emerging economies who only in recent years are experiencing the benefits (and negatives) of increasing production and consumerism. The distribution of goods raises questions about food miles, consumer expectations and equitable supply. In agricultural production, we need to explore whether vegetarianism is likely to become a necessity rather than an individual preference.

### **What if we do nothing?**

What if we were to do nothing? Those of you who may have seen the film *Prometheus* (2012) see the nightmarish vision of a planet that is desolate, devoid of any beauty, and which can scarcely sustain life. The film tells the story of a team of explorers who, sometime in the future, discover a clue to the origin of humankind on earth. This leads them to travel to the darkest corners of the universe and landing on a lonely and bleak planet. It is a hostile place that can barely sustain life and where the travellers find a limited supply of life-giving air, with no vegetation or animal life.

Parallels with life here on earth may seem rather far-fetched, but you may want to consider the swathes of our own planet that have now become inhabitable or unproductive – the region around Chernobyl, contaminated by radiation; the increasing desertification of the sub-Saharan area; the destruction of the rainforest (often cleared by giant corporations) to provide resources for the car, paper and agricultural industries<sup>5</sup>; and those cities where the air quality is so bad that it has become a public health issue<sup>6</sup>, and governments are finally being forced to act.<sup>7</sup>

### **Doing something**

However, it is by no means all doom and gloom. A look at the world wide web reveals that there are many groups involved in trying to protect the planet. From the worldwide Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to the regional European Environmental Agency, to governmental bodies, there is also a range of international and national voluntary organisations such as

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<sup>5</sup> See Rainforest Facts, <http://www.rain-tree.com/facts.htm> (accessed 20 June 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. ‘Air pollution causes early deaths’, a BBC news story on 21 February 2005, which noted that such pollution is responsible for 310,000 premature deaths in Europe; ‘Poor air “harms lungs of unborn”’, BBC News, 23 June 2004, which noted that it affects foetuses in the womb. See also ‘Report outlines Russia’s deadly pollution’, BBC News, 25 November 2002; ‘People fear air pollution in Riga’, *Baltic News Network*, 28 July 2011, <http://bnn-news.com/people-fear-air-pollution>; Jonathan Watts, ‘Satellite data reveals Beijing as air pollution capital of world’, *The Guardian*, 31 October 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2005...> (all accessed 20 June 2012).

<sup>7</sup> See the report on vehicle emission testing in Sri Lanka, Indeewarn Thilakarathne, ‘A step in the right direction in combating air pollution’, *Sunday Observer*, 20 July 2008, <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2008/07/20..>; and Mary Hennock’s ‘China combats air pollution with tough monitoring rules’, *The Guardian*, 1 March 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/mar/01..> (accessed 20 June 2012. Hennock writes that the state media in China acknowledged that government action was partly in response to online environmental campaigners using social media.

Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and Earthwatch. Many nations have legislation in place which attempt to address the issues. In addition, there are more localized initiatives such as the attempts to halt the further encroachment of the Sahara desert by building a 'Great Green Wall'.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, while it is praiseworthy indeed that many people are taking this issue seriously, perhaps more is needed.

### **An ethical issue**

There is no doubt that this has become an ethical issue. As Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter, *Centesimus Annus* points out:

*Equally worrying is the ecological question which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In his desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and to grow, man consumes the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed 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 provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him (para 37)...*

*...It is the task of the State to provide for the defence and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces. Just as in the time of primitive capitalism the State had the duty of defending the basic rights of workers, so now, with the new capitalism, the State and all of society have the duty of defending those collective goods which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual (para 40)*

In terms of justice, we need to consider what the world will be like in 2080, when today's young people are grandparents. The question is an important one if we consider what, if any, are our obligations to future generations and what kind of a world we wish to inhabit, or leave behind for those who come after us. Paul VI, in *Populorum Progressio* (1967) stated that:

*We are the heirs of earlier generations, and we reap benefits from the efforts of our contemporaries; we are under obligation to all men. Therefore we cannot disregard the welfare of those who will come after us to increase the human family. The reality of human solidarity brings us not only benefits but also obligations' (para 17).*

Following on from this, various conferences of bishops have voiced similar concerns. The bishops of England and Wales, as one example, noted in 1996 that 'damage to the environment is

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<sup>8</sup> See the Introductory Note Number 3, 'Great Green Wall Initiative of the Sahara and the Sahel', by the Sahara and Sahel Observatory, Tunis, 2008.

no respecter of frontiers, and damage done by one generation has the capacity to damage future generations'.<sup>9</sup> This was reiterated by them again in 2010:

*Responsibility to future generations requires that no-one takes more than a fair share of the planet's resources, and that all work to protect the environment from permanent damage, for instance through climate change..... We all need urgently to recover a sense of the integrity and sacredness of the whole of God's creation, of which we are not the masters but the stewards. Unless vigorous action is taken to defend it, then the next generations shall have nothing but a world devastated by our short-sightedness. We deceive ourselves if we believe that we can achieve a fulfilled life by exercising our choice to buy and consume regardless of the consequences. That is not good for the planet and it is not good for us.<sup>10</sup>*

To refer to *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), what is needed is 'not just an individualistic morality at work in us and the Church; we have to develop a sense of corporate responsibility'. Therefore, we have to consider how the choices we make today have a wider impact than in just our immediate milieu. In other words, we have to consider the problem of climate change from a personal, societal and universal perspective, what the barriers to this are, and how we might overcome them.

### **Barrier: The Tragedy of the Commons**

The so-called 'tragedy of the commons' is a dilemma arising from the situation where individuals, acting independently from their own self-interest, will ultimately deplete a shared limited resource. This will happen even when it is clear that it not in anyone's long term interest for this to happen.<sup>11</sup>

Air is all around us. We cannot see or touch it (as we might do with water, earth, or fire) but we would know the moment we became short of it. There seems plenty to go around, and we cannot meter it as we could do with water usage; neither can we transfer it into private ownership (as we might do with land); and we cannot control it in the same way that we might be able to with an element such as fire. We are therefore lulled into a false sense of security; there is plenty to go around, so breathe deeply! Yet, we know that air is a shared resource, and that we are damaging it. There may be no shortage of air, but the air quality many live with on a daily basis is not conducive to healthy living.

Contemporary situations today exemplifying the idea of 'the tragedy of the commons' - the overfishing of oceans, the destruction of rainforests for agriculture, wasting water, and air which is polluted by our human endeavours such as industrial emissions and driving cars. Various solutions to this have been put forward – government regulation, converting common goods into private property, regulation of access, curtailment of freedoms, and even coercion. All of these possible answers have their down-side, and criticisms from those who favour individual property rights or common ownership.

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<sup>9</sup> CBCEW, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> CBCEW, *Choosing the Common Good*, 2010, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> This dilemma was described in Garrett Hardin's influential article, 'The Tragedy of the Commons', first published in the journal, *Science*, in 1968. Even though Hardin has his critics, his theory is frequently cited to support the notion of sustainable development, and how to balance economic growth with environmental protection.

## **Barrier: Defining ‘Wealth’**

‘Wealth’ is not a word I am comfortable with. For me, it conjures up images (perhaps caricatures) of well-built men, with big cigars and expensive, gas-guzzling cars, ostentatiously displaying how well they have done in terms of their acquisition of possessions and assets. However, there are other definitions. For anyone who has ever experienced the pain of a broken leg and been at the mercy of doctors and nurses in a hospital, while enduring a temporary loss of independence, wealth might well be re-defined by that person as having two legs that work. Depending on your circumstances, wealth might also be being free of the pain of toothache; free of the worry of redundancy or house possession; free of the worry that if we need it, an ambulance will be there if we need help; or that there is a state safety net which keeps us from the workhouse or starvation. Wealth might also be defined in terms of having breathable air and a smog-free environment.

So a question for each of us is: what do we mean by ‘wealth’? What is it we treasure? (i) material goods, or (ii) something more intangible – health, opportunity, education, social services, community, friends and family, and a healthy environment. ‘Wealth creation’, in this second aspect, takes on a different meaning – it is not simply an individualistic idea, but something that serves the common good. This is an idea that appears throughout the body of Catholic social teaching, from *Rerum Novarum* 1891 to *Caritas in Veritate* 2009. *Rerum Novarum* tells us that all citizens can and ought to contribute to the common good (para 34), while *Caritas in Veritate* tells us that ‘the more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them’ (para 7).

We have become used to describing human beings as ‘consumers’ and we have measured our wellbeing in terms of economic advancement, the goods we have acquired, the freedom that we have been able to exercise in making decisions. We need to recognise that the environmental crisis is not only a result of the failure of economic policy or regulation, but also the product of individual decisions – ‘Yes, I will trade up my car, go on holiday to Antarctica, buy those Jimmy Choo shoes, buy hardwood furniture made from rainforest sources, get vegetables and fruit regardless of where they were produced and how many airmiles they have travelled.....Live now, sort it out later! Anyway, tomorrow might never come...’

The recent economic downturn has given people perhaps an opportunity to think about their ‘needs’ rather than their ‘wants’. It might even be said that we are at a critical point in our history when we can choose life, rather than death. We have seen the precariousness of many of the institutions we thought were unassailable. We have seen that individually, reliance on the market to meet all of our needs, to make us feel better about ourselves, to solve the problems of world poverty – whether material or spiritual – is to chase after an illusion. And finally we are beginning to wake up to the realisation that, in pursuing bigger and better, and having more, we are killing off the planet, using up resources, and leaving a legacy that is far from good for our children and future generations.

These are but two barriers to finding a solution to the ecological problem. How might we begin to address them?

## The ‘common good’ and ‘solidarity’

This idea of the ‘common good’ is important. Defined by Pope John XXIII as ‘the sum total of conditions of social living, whereby persons are enabled more fully and readily to achieve their own perfection’<sup>12</sup>, and is sometimes spoken of as ‘interdependence’. The idea of the ‘common good’ counteracts the idea of a strongly individualistic concept of the person, by emphasizing his or her social dimension. This means that all of us are required to work for the common good, and includes all others within society. This is very different from the idea of pursuing ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’; the ‘common good’ means the ‘greatest good of *all* persons’.

This idea of the ‘common good’ is not solely confined to individual nations. John XXIII spoke of the ‘universal’ common good<sup>13</sup>, and emphasized that the common good of states cannot be divorced from the common good of the entire human family (para. 98), thus giving a foundation for a global environmental ethic. Given that he also stated that the attainment of this common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities (para 54), this suggests that both national and international solutions have to be sought to issues affecting the development of all people.

In many of his statements, Pope John Paul II recognized the need for such an ethic. In 1990, he stated:

Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone...[I]ts various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, States and the international community.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere, he goes on to say that the defence of the common good such as the natural environment cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces, and that governments have a particular responsibility in this area.<sup>15</sup> But more is required from all of us, and is encapsulated in the word ‘solidarity’. John Paul II, in an earlier document, says that:

*.....in a world divided and beset by every type of conflict, the conviction is growing of a radical interdependence and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane. Today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided’.*<sup>16</sup>

Solidarity is ‘not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people’. Rather, ‘it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all’ (para 38). What might this mean for *me*?

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<sup>12</sup> *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, para 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Pacem in Terris*, 1962, para 100.

<sup>14</sup> *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* (Message, World Day of Peace), 1990, para. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, para. 40.

<sup>16</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, para 26.

## Rediscovering the virtues

Earlier, I touched on the issue of governmental legislation as a way of coping with the problems identified. While it is a necessary and welcome step, it is simply not enough, as there will always be people and institutions trying to sidestep the rules, resulting in yet further legislation to ensure compliance. We need more than this – it might be argued that what we need is not better legislation but better people. Many writers speak of the need for us to develop as better human beings through the practice of virtue, which might be defined as ‘doing good even when no-one is looking’:

*By the pursuit of virtue we act well not because of external constraint but because it has become natural for us to do so. The virtues form us as moral agents, so that we do what is right and honourable for no other reason than that it is right and honourable, irrespective of reward and regardless of what we are legally obliged to do. Virtuous action springs from a sense of one’s own dignity and that of others, and from self-respect as a citizen.<sup>17</sup>*

In terms of our obligations to the natural world, we can consider the classical virtues (articulated by Aquinas) of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage. These give us some help in making decisions about fostering the common good in solidarity with others, by enabling us to raise the real questions and in helping discern solutions.

For example, if justice means giving to each person what he or she needs to live a full life, this is an appropriate virtue to develop as we consider the polluted and dangerous environment in which many are forced to live today. We need the virtue of justice to help to move us away from merely feeling sad for those who are suffering to a positive response in taking action to foster just relationships between people and the planet. It may lead us to ask how we can foster the kind of character that cares about fairness and equity in today’s world, and how we reform social institutions so that they work for the common good.

Prudence, or wisdom, is the intellectual habit that assesses the means necessary to accomplish the objective to be achieved. In environmental terms, it seeks to develop the capacity to make wise trade-offs in often complex circumstances. This is critical in terms of sustainability, when we seek to meet the needs (though not necessarily the ‘wants’) of the present generation, without compromising future generations in their attempts to meet their needs. This virtue helps us be far-sighted and responsible, so that we can take action now, rather than leaving future generations to deal with the problems we leave behind.

Temperance can be defined as a firm disposition to moderate our desires for the sake of more important goods, and is a highly relevant ethic, as it can be used to enable us to face our patterns of consumption. It can also be understood as ‘restraint’ or ‘self-control’, and one way of expressing solidarity with those suffering environmental injustice can be to consider how in our own lives we can ‘reduce, reuse, or recycle’ and embrace a greater simplicity of life. It may also mean asking hard questions about the goods we do buy, and who bears the cost of the cheap products in that are available for purchase in our shops. The movements looking at socially responsible investment and ethical consumerism are two ways of considering the costs of our consumption in terms of resources, human, material, and cost to the planet.

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<sup>17</sup> CBCEW, *Choosing the Common Good*, 2010, p. 17.

One reaction that is possible in considering environmental problems is one of fear or despair, which may lead to us becoming paralysed and unable to act, or to feel powerless to make any kind of change, or to enter a state of denial. The virtue of fortitude or bravery is more commonly described as courage, which can give us the perseverance to struggle for justice in the face of discouragement. It enables us also to cultivate an attitude of hope, and helps us move beyond our negative feelings to focus on the kind of person we want to be (and what the world needs us to be), and what kind of character will help us live out our commitment to the common good. This kind of hope, rooted in our habit of mind and heart, is precisely what we need to bring to situations where environmental injustices are being perpetrated.

What I have outlined above raises a number of questions; there are no easy answers. But I invite you to consider those that I have outlined, and raise others that you think need also to be addressed.

### **QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

1. To what extent have we been guilty of an attitude of 'domination' rather than 'dominion' or 'stewardship' with regard to natural resources?
2. How do we distinguish between our 'needs' and our 'wants'?
3. In what ways today are we 'wasteful'?
4. What are the obligations arising from human solidarity?
5. What are our obligations to future generations?
6. How do we develop the virtues in ourselves and in others?