

ECOLOGY FROM A NIHILIST POINT OF VIEW

FOR AN ECOLOGY THAT IS OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

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INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

Premises

- Nihilism is a concept that affirms life is without meaning and consequently of little or no value.
- In this perspective nature is debased. Nihilism is therefore one of the root causes of the environmental crisis which is only one aspect of the more general crisis of meaning widespread in today's culture.
- The root of the nihilist crisis is atheism or secularism: "we live as if God did not exist" (*etsi Deus non daretur*).
- To resolve these two crises we must encounter God's path; God is the origin of all meaning – including the meaning of nature. It is important that we recover the religious or spiritual dimension of existence.

Outline

GOD

the	Is the relation on which universe is based
relation and fails	Detached from this everything falls
the	Secularism and atheism are root of nihilism.
consequence: mentalism)	(Extreme funda

I ----- HUMAN BEING ----- THE OTHER

- Symptoms of Nihilism - Symptoms of Nihilism

1. Suicide 1. Abortion and euthanasia
 2. Use of drugs 2. Widespread violence
 3. Dangerous sports 3. Lower birthrate
 4. Unsafe sex 4. Sex trivialized
- (Extreme consequence: 5. Exclude the poor
Self-absorption, selfishness (Extreme consequence:
Humanism)

NATURE

Four Successive Stages of Nihilism

1. Domination: nature is "useful" (profit, capitalist exploitation)
2. Pleasure: nature is "pleasurable" (hedonism, consumerism)
3. Indifference: nature is "neglected" (little or no value)
4. Destruction: nature is "violated" (death instinct)
(Extreme consequence: Ecocentrism, Neo-Pantheism).

I. ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS ONE DIMENSION OF THE CRISIS OF MEANING

Crisis of meaning: framework of the environmental crisis

Ecology is an important concern today. But ecology is not the most important problem we face. There are other equally important problems: poverty, feminism, cultural identity or insecurity. A more important problem is What does life mean. Why are we alive? Is life worth living? The really important problem we face is the devaluation of existence, of being and of the world. In brief it is a distaste for life: this is the problem that underlies all our others concerns.

Acquire urgency

This is the great question human beings have always faced, but it acquires even greater urgency in our time when *taedium vitae* [a distaste for life] is so widespread. Existence is lifeless, colorless and dull. In the words of the Bible people's eyes are "wasted." (*Deut* 28,65) If the ecology of nature is in bad shape the "ecology of man" (Benedict XVI) is in even worse shape. It is man who is unwell and he is infecting nature with his malaise. It is not just in the *oikos* [shelter] of nature that man does not feel at home but in the *oikos* [shelter] of his soul he is equally not at home. He is like one who lives in a palace but whose soul is troubled.

This distaste for life is apparent in the various dimensions of human relations as described in the outline at the beginning of this paper. Truth to tell we are living in an *anti-life* culture in the broadest sense of the expression. The devaluation of nature is a part and expression of nihilism's general devaluation of everything. If my life is without value nature is worth even less. If I do not love and respect myself I will love and respect the environment even less.

In his message for the 1990 World Day of Peace John Paul II says with reason: "the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect" of a "profound moral crisis." He goes on to say: "If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself."

The crisis of meaning and its consequences for the environmental crisis

If my life is without meaning – what will be the immediate consequence? Hedonism – as St. Paul so aptly puts it: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (*I Cor* 15, 32). Let us make the best of what life remains for us. Today's consumerism is just another name for hedonism. We know consumerism is anti-ecological because it exhausts the earth's resources. Indifferent to the earth's future the hedonist will say 'so what!' *Après moi le déluge.*

One can understand the apocalyptic expectations of certain ecology groups. Apocalyptic alarm, however, does not necessarily lead to a responsible attitude. On the contrary; the hedonist feels more inclined to pursue reckless pleasure and consumption. He reasons "We might as well enjoy ourselves before everything comes crashing down." This has been the reaction of all frivolous elites facing historical tragedy – witness the fall of Rome, the Black Plague or the fall of Berlin in 1945.

Some lack any transcendent view of life. They are moved by the death instinct and find perverse pleasure in seeing a tragic outcome to the environmental crisis. The nihilist would say "If everything comes to an end it's the same as if it never existed." If death demolishes everything then the hell with the world. The essential argument that we have only one life to live does not necessarily cause concern for the environment. The hedonist would more likely respond with selfishness or indifference: "Let others worry about it. I don't give a damn."

The danger of destroying the earth has increased as our means of destruction have become more powerful (e.g. atomic weapons, the machines of modern industry.) The danger does not lie in the means of destruction but rather in the human beings who use them. Our primary concern must be the human being whose heart is infected with the virus of nihilism. We must try to free him from this fatal disease. We must first save man if we hope to save man's world. It is true that mankind and its survival depend on the environment; it is equally true that the environment depends on mankind and mankind's sense of responsibility.

The other side of the coin: positive reactions to the environment

We must realize that the crisis of meaning and its repercussions on nature are only one side of the coin in our present situation. There is a positive side as well. Ecology has a dialectic or competitive character where the negative confronts the positive.

It cannot be denied that there is today a growing awareness of environmental concerns. Proponents of the ecological counteroffensive include:

- numerous social groups: non-governmental groups and green parties are fighting for the environment;
- governments increasingly include environmental concerns in their programs and projects;
- religions are developing doctrine and practice that promotes respect for the environment.

All these factors are creating a bulwark against nihilism. They show that there is still a love of life and in times of crisis this love gains strength. We must, however, determine "in whose name" are these groups unfurling the

environmental flag. Their work is good but is their motivation equally good? Are they coherent? This is what we must examine.

II. THE ROOTS OF THE PRESENT CRISIS

Today's anthropocentric and secularist view of nature

We know that modern anthropocentrism has – in the words of Descartes – made man “the master and lord of nature.” Man has replaced God at the center of the world. This is the “Copernican revolution” Kant spoke about. On the whole modernity is anti-ecological. It desacralizes nature and reduces it to material to be manipulated. The world is nothing more than a collection of objects to be used at will, a mass of means man can exploit for his own benefit.

At the root of this mentality of ownership lie secularism and atheism. There is no higher power to which a human being is ontologically or ethically linked. The “God of this world” is man himself. Anthropocentrism becomes anthropotheism. This is the origin of the nihilist view of modern anthropocentrism. Man goes from being the “guardian angel” of creation to being its “Satan.” He may not have created the world but he can destroy it. Modernity may be at the root of the ecological problem but it cannot resolve that problem unless its basic convictions undergo a radical transformation. If ecology's only basis is humanism – as moderns would have it – it would be subject to the same instability human beings (individuals or groups) experience.

One of the shortcomings of modern humanism is its attempt to base concern for nature on a technical, scientific, philosophical rational foundation. This is a legitimate objection to the so-called “deep ecology.” The cause of life far exceeds any kind of rationalism. The rational explanations brought forth to defend the integrity of nature are not entirely convincing. Only something transcendental, something like religion, can provide a solid foundation for life precisely because it derives from a sacred or ultimate sanction. Moreover religion provides simple justifications that can justify broad generalization as St. Thomas notes in the opening of the *Summa*.

Equivocal alternatives to “deep ecology”

The so-called "deep ecology" is popular in the USA, Germany and Scandinavia. It replaces anthropocentrism with biocentrism or more specifically ecocentrism. It is not man at the center of the world but nature; nature is the whole and man is a part of this whole.

For this reason "deep ecology" is not just concerned with the environment, its concern extends to the ecosystem – i.e. to the whole of nature of which man is a part. This is not simply ecology but rather ecologism. Ecology is not just one cause among many; it is a philosophy, a *Weltanschauung*, a religion. At this level one is no longer practicing nature sciences but ecosophy. Nature is thus "re-sacralized." To be sacred life must be a transcendent value and for this reason a central value. Biocentrism is presented as an alternative to modern anthropocentrism, a critique of modern science and technology.

But this overvalues ecology; is being overlaid with metaphysical and religious meaning. Ecocentrism sees nature as the great ontological horizon beyond which nothing exists. At the base of this concept there is an undeniable, naturalist monism that leads to pantheism: *natura sive Deus*. Nature becomes a new transcendence. Previously man was at the center; now it is nature and life that transmit power (vitalism). Nothing is gained by moving from one idolatry to another. This is but one more surrogate for religion: in place of God we have nature – which is always a relative entity.

In an effort to establish an "ethic of responsibility" based on nature, the philosopher Hans Jonas posits this almost self-evident principle: "Life says 'yes' to life." Similarly Albert Schweitzer(1875-1965) cited "reverence for life" as the foundation of all ethics; he posited this principle: "I am one life that wants to live among other lives who also want to live." This is beautiful but ambiguous. In its immediacy life appears as an independent value. If we contemplate the marvelous spectacle of life – its harmony, variety and gratuity – it is clear that life has value for itself and not just for us human beings.

Clearly life is not self-sustaining. It comes from a transcendent source that sustains its strength and exuberance. Nature bursts forth from a profound abyss and generates everything – this is the *natura naturans* of St. Thomas not Spinoza. Nature is even more necessary than life; it justifies and gives value to life. This is where the supreme Reality we call the "living and true God" (*1 Thess 1,9*) comes in and more specifically the "Holy Spirit who is the Lord and

source of life." By itself living nature – including man – cannot subsist; it lacks the basic foundation. To pretend that nature can affirm itself on its own is to ignore its feet of clay: a slight deviation in cosmic laws – a small stone rolling down the mountain – is enough to smash it to pieces (cf. *Dan 2*, 34-45).

In synthesis: insofar as biocentrism is based on modern anthropocentrism cannot validly counteract to ecological nihilism. "Deep ecology" is right in positing a religious view of nature but its religious vision is based on myth whereas the Christian religion is based on mysteries as we shall subsequently see.

III. AN ECOLOGY BASED ON GOD THE CREATOR

Ecology between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism

Only an ecology that is open to the transcendent can effectively counteract ecological nihilism. Only this kind of ecology can overcome the obstacles of anthropocentric or ecocentric ecology. These two types of ecology not only fail to repel nihilism they promote it. A genuinely religious ecology provides an ideal middle path (*via media*) between these two extreme and diametrically opposed approaches. It opposes anthropocentrism's totally secularized nature that is subject to arbitrary human manipulation. Similarly it opposes ecocentrism's absolutized nature that can be fetishized.

In the Christian faith neither man nor nature is the center of reality – God is. God is the measure of all things, of both man and nature. They exist only through His love and for His glory and in His glory they find fulfillment. It is true that nature comes before and is greater than man – in one sense nature may be our mother but ultimately she is our sister because she too was created by God.

What is man's legitimate place in creation? Neither at the summit nor at the bottom – rather in the middle: between God and the world, between the Creator and creation. The Book of Genesis articulates this image of human beings. From the most ancient account of man's creation (cf. *Gen 2*, 4b – 3, 24: Yahwist source / tenth century) man's origin is from earth and water. Man is the

gardener of creation. A more recent account (cf. *Gen* 1, 1 – 2, 4: Priestly source / sixth century) man's origin is divine. He is the *imago Dei* [God's image]. In both accounts man is seen as superior to the animals and all other elements of nature (cf. *Gen* 1, 26. 28; 2,18-19).

As the Fathers of the Church bear witness Christian doctrine professes an undeniable anthropocentrism: man is the crown of creation. But it is a "relative anthropocentrism" – it is subordinate to God and His plan. This is far different from modern "absolute anthropocentrism" which relates everything to man. If man has an indisputable primacy it is only in relation to creation for which he must account to his Lord. Between God and the world man stands as a caretaker or protector; he is the servant of God, the agent of God's Will in the world.

Man's central importance is clear in the New Testament as well. For Christ one individual is worth more than the whole universe: "What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (*Mk* 8, 36). On several occasions Jesus places the human being above other creatures (cf. *Mt* 10, 31; 12, 11; *Lk* 13, 15); he does not demean other creatures – on the contrary the Father cares for them (cf. *Mt* 7, 26-30; 10, 29). St. Paul tells us that there is a hierarchy in creation: "Everything belongs to you and you to Christ and Christ to God" (*1 Cor* 3, 22-23). If man enjoys any sort of superiority it involves service to others as the Gospel rule has it: "whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant" (*Mk* 10, 43). This applies to the realm of nature as well.

Christianity is ideally placed between anthropocentrism and biocentrism. It includes what elements of truth these two may possess:

- with anthropocentrism it accepts the truth that man enjoys a privileged place in creation and therefore special responsibility for it before the Creator;
- with biocentrism it shares the belief that all things have independent value in relation to man. Man is not the absolute center of creation: he is not the Lord of Nature but only a part of it – even if his place in nature is altogether special.

The Biblical idea of "creatureliness"

The Judeo-Christian concept of creation synthesizes the two elements described above. Creation implies the two: operative autonomy and ontological dependence. These two dimensions can be defined as follows: the creature depends ontologically on its Creator both for its autonomy and its existence.

The creature's autonomy is based on God (theonomy) and his existence shares in the existence of the Creator.

If this is the case nature will decay and perish if it is disconnected from God. The Second Vatican Council affirms this in monumental fashion: "For without the Creator the creature would disappear." (*Gaudium et Spes*, 36; Cf. *Caritas in Veritate* 48). To overcome the modern dominant view of nature and provide a broad and solid foundation to the cause of ecology we must recover the idea of "creatureliness."

Unfortunately secularism makes it difficult for moderns to understand the concept of "creatureliness" – the original and final dependence on God which is a natural and constituent element of the creature. From a Christian perspective the unequivocal name for what is called variously "nature," "cosmos," or "everything" is "creation." Even linguistically "creation" refers to a "Creator." Jesus said this definitively when he saw the Father's loving activity in nature: the sun, the rain, the birds, the lilies of the field. This concept is found throughout the Bible. The Psalmists see the world as related to God: "O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth!" (*Ps* 8). This is true in the prophets as well, especially in Daniel's canticle "Works of the Lord, bless the Lord" (*Dan* 3). The saints echo this thought, especially St. Francis in his "Canticle of the Creatures."

For modern secularism the world is no longer a creation, it is merely nature. It no longer has any native relationship with the one we call God. Secularism denies the world's ontological dependence on God. The world has lost awareness of its creatureliness. It no longer realizes that its existence, subsistence and autonomy derive from an ultimate Source. Now that they are no longer creatures the realities of this world have been reduced to simple things, objects to be used at the discretion of human beings. They no longer speak of or for God but rather of man and his technological prowess.

Creation implies that both man and nature exist as distinct from their Creator and follow their own laws. This does not mean that the creature's autonomy is total. There is the ambivalence of the Cabalistic theory of *zim-zum* much in vogue today. God withdraws and leaves place to the world and man. This theory may explain the creature's autonomy but it does not create it. This would turn autonomy into anarchy. We must realize that a creature's autonomy is dependent to the extent that it was established by God. This may seem a paradox but the truth is that to the extent creatures are autonomous

they are attached to their Creator just as the lantern is attached to the roof, the stream to the spring or daylight to the sun.

Our concept of "creation" must make clear that its essential and principle element is the idea of "dependence" or "establishment." The idea of autonomy is a derived and secondary idea since a creature's autonomy is "dependent." It was given and permitted by the Creator. In the words of *Gaudium et Spes*: if things possess "their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order" it is because they have been "endowed" with these things by the Creator (36). This is not a question of the simple logic of "on the one hand this and on the other hand ..." It is a rigorous dialectic between the "determiner" and the "determined," between the "stabilizer" and the "stabilized." In close to ten passages the New Testament refers to creation as a "foundation" (Cf. *Mt* 25, 34; *Lk* 11, 50; *Jn* 17,24 etc.)

It has become a cliché to say that by conferring autonomy on creatures the idea of creation has secularized the world and left it open to scientific exploration. The passage from secularization to secularism is short. This passage fatally occurs when one loses sight of the fact that a creature's autonomy is relative (to God) and shared (through the action of God). Creation accounts in Genesis demythologize the world – but only insofar as they "creaturize" it. Things cease being idols and become creatures. This is true secularization. Moderns have dangerously radicalized this insight: not only have they "demythologized" the world they have also "de-creaturized" it and collapsed into secularism. They have removed the world from its foundation (*Grund*) and left it suspended over an abyss (*Abgrund*). Deprived of its foundation the world disappears into the vortex of nihilism – like water in a bottomless barrel.

Finally, "creation" implies "meaning." Creation presupposes the free and loving act of God. He does not create out of need but out of his exuberant goodness. He creates to reveal His love and His glory and so that creatures may share in that love and glory. God creates nothing without a plan, a wise and good plan. Nothing in creation is haphazard. Everything has meaning; everything comes from love and moves towards glory.

The Christological Dimension of Ecology

If we stop at the idea of God the Creator and do not go forward we will never achieve an ecological theology that corresponds to the Christian faith. Without Christ nature hides its final secret, its deepest mystery. That mystery is the Christ-like constitution of nature.

If with God we discover nature as creation with Christ we describe nature enveloped in a higher mystery, the mystery of salvation. This is what comes of Christology from a salvation-history perspective.

1. By the very fact of **Creation** the world carries traces of Christ because "All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be" (*Jn* 1, 3). In him all things hold together (Cf. *Col* 1, 17; *1 Cor* 8, 6). Christ's incarnation was conceived before every creature, Christ is the "firstborn of all creation" (*Col* 1, 15) and its supreme archetype.

2. Through the **Incarnation** in time Creation was in a sense assumed into and through Christ. It becomes part of his mystical-ontological constitution. It is his "cosmic body." This process is called "recapitulation" and it extends throughout the whole of evolution. In the Holy Eucharist the "natural" elements of bread and wine become "transubstantiated" into the body of God.

3. Through the **Paschal Mystery** the "heavens and the earth" and not just mankind were redeemed by the blood of Christ and reconciled to their Creator (Cf. *Eph* 1, 1-20; 2, 14. 16; *Col* 1, 20). In Christ the whole world, and not just mankind, is reconciled with God (Cf. *2 Cor* 5, 18-19).

4. Through Christ's **glorification** Creation – like human beings – is given an eternal and blessed destiny. It is for this glorious destiny that Creation sighs in its depths and waits with so much anxiety (Cf. *Rom* 8, 18-21). The Risen Christ represents simultaneously the first-fruits and the guarantee, the model and the cause of the world's eschatological apotheosis. If Christ's incarnation is called "the first-born of all Creation" his resurrection has the glorious title: "the first-born of the dead" (*Col* 1, 18; *Apoc* 1, 5).

We should speak about the *Spiritus Creator* (Spirit Creator). He is the most holy breath from the Father and from the Son (*Filioque*); He is proclaimed "the Lord who gives life" in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. His mission is to complete the work of Creation and lead it back to its ultimate source (*redditus*).

But we will not say more about this subject here which has already been handled by J. Moltmann.

IV. A WAY OUT OF ECOLOGICAL NIHILISM AN ECOLOGY BASED ON GOD

To “restore the love” of nature in the deepest and most coherent sense we must go back to its source: the Creator. The more love there is for the Creator the more love there will be for his creation. This is true of the saints and especially the ecology saints. If St. Francis, the patron saint of Christian ecology, “loved creation” how much more he “loved the Creator” (cf. Celano, *Vita prima*, 80-81). For Francis creation was a stairway that led to the throne of God, “a clear reflection” of his goodness (cf. Celano, *Vita prima*, 165).

Today we need a theologically based ecology. The following three levels (in descending order) will help us re-evaluate ecology from a Christian perspective. The highest level is spirituality, the middle level is ethics and the lowest level is our daily activity.

1. Re-discovering the “creatureliness” of things (the spiritual or mystical level)

If moving away from the Creator has led us to disdain nature going back to him will restore our love of nature. If we abandon the Creator the whole of creation will abandon us. We could say that the fundamental solution to the ecology problem is *conversio ad Deum*: a return to the Creator. We must learn again how to look at all things as “creatures” of God. As we said above “Creation” is the authentically religious and theological term Christians use to speak of the world and the Cosmos.

We know that Francis loved the realities of nature not because he was a devotee of nature but because he was a devotee of creation. For him everything was a part of creation. In his “*Canticle of Brother Sun*” the Saint is not celebrating creation directly but praising God because of His creation. He wants his brothers to be “interpreters of God” and not just singers of creation (*Legenda perugina*, 43).

Genesis I tells us seven times that things are “good” because they come from the loving hands of God. The whole world is beautiful and good, marvelous and lovable. If there is evil in the world it is because human beings have badly used the good things God created. The spiritual person sees everything enveloped in a “sacred aura.” For the spiritual person things are “transparent” or “diaphanous.” They reverberate with the presence of the Creator. This is not pantheism – rather it is “omnipresence”: God is present in things and things are present in God.

We must eliminate decisively the concept of a remote or foreign God who is opposed to the world. This is an heretical, Gnostic concept that leads to *contemptus saeculi* (contempt of history) and *fuga mundi* (flight from the world). The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the Christian “loves and receives ... things as flowing constantly from the hand of God ... using and enjoying them in detachment and liberty of spirit” (*Gaudium et Spes* 37,4).

Consequently the relationship between God and the world follows the dialectic of direct and not inverse proportionality. Karl Rahner tells us that the more God is immanent in the world the more he transcends it and the more he transcends the world the more he is immanent in it. In his tenderness God embraces creation and with his power he overcomes it. He is intimately within things and at the same time he overwhelms them infinitely. He is deeply present and at the same time immensely distant.

God reveals his presence and marvelous power especially in living things. God is “the lover of every living thing” (*Wis* 11, 26). There is there a breath of the Creator (Cf. *Gen* 2, 7) and an “incorruptible spirit” (*Wis* 12, 1). The Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas, tells us that man is, before God, the priest of the Cosmos. The human being praises God through and with creation. According to Paul Claudel creation needs human beings to carry out the essential task of proclaiming God. Creation’s praise is stuck at the first letter of the alphabet, it can but stammer. The human being is like the priest and king of the Cosmos, he can transform creation’s stammer into “Abba.”

We must re-discover a spirituality of creation that responds to the challenge of ecology and more directly to the challenge of nihilism. This must not be a functional spirituality that is artificially created for the sake of ecology but rather a Christian spirituality that can stand on its own. This is a spirituality that grows

naturally and can re-integrate the whole of creation by re-presenting the Triune God.

2. To re-discover “ecological justice” (the moral or ethical level)

We know our moral obligations to others and to God. But to creation? Is there such a thing as “ecological justice?” There is a fierce debate about whether the things of nature have rights and duties; are they really ethical or legal subjects? Michel Serres speaks about a “natural contract” between man and nature.

But the whole discussion is poorly laid out if one ignores the third pole: the Creator. The authentic relationship is, as elsewhere, triangular: man, nature, God. If we see the things of nature as creatures we can escape from the dead end of economics. Without a theological perspective – even just a rational one – it is impossible to lay out the question of ecology correctly.

As creatures things are not without rights. They enjoy an intrinsic dignity and value linked to the nature with which the Creator has endowed them. Things are ontologically good in themselves. Their worth does not derive from the use to which they can be put or the financial value they represent as anthropocentrism would have it. St. Augustine (*City of God*, XI, 1) tells us their worth derives from their very nature and the place they occupy in creation. Of itself nature has the right to subsist and live, to keep healthy and enjoy its harmony and above all to be spared suffering and be allowed to grow.

If things have value independent of human beings we can affirm that they are truly independent subjects of law. Since justice involves respect for the law there must be an ecological justice. Human beings have ethical obligations to nature. As the *imago Dei* (image of God) man is the “shepherd of Creation.” He must care for it “in God’s name” and according to God’s Will. He cannot use nature as he pleases as moderns would have it. But at the same time he cannot worship nature as neo-panteists would have it. The source and measure of ecological justice is neither man nor nature itself but rather God who is the creator of both man and nature.

Some would propose a “new alliance” with nature. There is no need of such a thing. Rather we must extend the eternal alliance of God with mankind and the rest of creation. This alliance is sealed with the Ten Commandments. It needs no new or special commandment concerning ecology. The commandment

“Thou shalt not kill” involves taking care of every living thing, of every being in nature. “Thou shalt not kill” means “Thou shalt not destroy things in vain.” Even the general commandment “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” can easily include nature which is morally “a neighbor” to us and our biological destiny.

There are limits to humankind’s exploitation of nature. And this leads to our critique of consumerism – something prejudicial not just to nature but to mankind as well. This gives rise to the increasing insistence on a “sustainable lifestyle.” John Paul II talks about a “new and rigorous lifestyle.” But already the New Testament tells us: “If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that.” (*1 Tim 6, 8*). Today we all need an example of sober consumption. This example can be given through teaching – but is better transmitted as a living example especially within the family.

This ethical-professional stance does not free us from exerting pressure on government and large companies that are especially responsible (80%) for pollution and ecological destruction. Politically governments and materially industries bear the principal responsibility for protecting the environment. Paragraph 16 of the UN Rio Declaration (1992) explicitly declares: “the polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution.” In simpler terms: “whoever makes the mess should clean it up.”

In synthesis: conversion (return) to God involves an authentic return to creation – an “ecological conversion” to use John Paul II’s words.

3. New admiration for nature (the esthetic or poetic level)

Finally we need a new sort of that “eternal romanticism” that dwells in the human soul. We need a romanticism that is more aware of our feelings of communion with nature as part of a universal brotherhood under the eyes of Christ. We must see everything with the eyes of children, poets and saints. We must once more look at creation with eyes of wonder. When he was an old man St. Ignatius went into his garden in Rome and touched the flower gently saying: “Speak softly, I am listening to you.”

There is a temptation we must avoid; a temptation to which all human beings are prone: an exaggerated love of nature that turns it into something divine. This temptation was the subject of a pithy condemnation in the Book of Wisdom: “For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God,

and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan; But either fire, or wind, or the swift air, or the circuit of the stars, or the mighty water, or the luminaries of heaven, the governors of the world, they considered gods. Now if out of joy in their beauty they thought them gods, let them know how far more excellent is the Lord than these; for the original source of beauty fashioned them.” (*Wis* 13, 1-3). Job tells us he was attracted by the beauty of the world but resisted the temptation to see it as divine: “Had I looked upon the sun as it shone, or the moon in the splendor of its progress, And had my heart been secretly enticed to waft them a kiss with my hand; This too would be a crime for condemnation, for I should have denied God above.” (*Job* 31, 26-28).

Honor is only genuine when it corresponds to the dignity of the creatures being honored. We have seen that creation certainly involves dependence but at the same time it shares in the beauty, goodness, power and wisdom of the Creator.

Conclusion: our essential position

Only by re-discovering the Creator will we re-discover creation and its value; we will thus provide creation with an ultimate foundation. Without this foundation nature will continue to sway back and forth like a building without a foundation. This is what happens when we are trapped by the extremes of modern anthropocentrism and pantheistic ecologism. If we build our environmental concern on a religious foundation it will acquire a transcendent and sacred guarantee.

When we see God as the measure of all things including nature, nature will be protected from the threats posed by man’s arbitrary decisions on the one hand and the seductive beauty of nature itself on the other. When we believe and experience God we effectively eliminate the nihilist point of view and the loss of ultimate meaning which is the root of our ecological crisis.

Motivated by faith in their Creator and Father, Christians will commit themselves to creation; they will join with the followers of other religions to fight for an ecology that is open to the Transcendent. As Christians fight alongside other environmental activists they will zealously claim and preserve their own spiritual identity. If they should lose this spiritual identity they will be like salt that has lost its savor and in the words of the Master: “no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.” (*Mt* 5, 13).

Today we discover that faith is the “salt of the earth” and that this is true in the realm of environmental concerns as well. It is salt that preserves the earth from corruption and restores the savor of meaning.

Curitiba (Paraná) February 16, 2010
Solemnity of the Seven Holy Founders