

## Excerpt from the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*

### IV. A COMMON RESPONSIBILITY

#### a. The environment, a collective good

**466.** *Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting a common good,*[979] destined for all, by preventing anyone from using “with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate — animals, plants, the natural elements — simply as one wishes, according to one's own economic needs”. [980] It is a responsibility that must mature on the basis of the global dimension of the present ecological crisis and the consequent necessity to meet it on a worldwide level, since all beings are interdependent in the universal order established by the Creator. “One must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the ‘cosmos’ ”. [981]

This perspective takes on a particular importance when one considers, in the context of the close relationships that bind the various parts of the ecosystem, *the environmental value of biodiversity*, which must be handled with a sense of responsibility and adequately protected, because it constitutes an extraordinary richness for all of humanity. In this regard, each person can easily recognize, for example, the importance of the Amazon, “one of the world's most precious natural regions because of its bio- diversity which makes it vital for the environmental balance of the entire planet”. [982] *Forests* help maintain the essential natural balance necessary for life. [983] Their destruction also through the inconsiderate and malicious setting of fires, accelerates the processes of desertification with risky consequences for water reserves and compromises the lives of many indigenous peoples and the well-being of future generations. All individuals as well as institutional subjects must feel the commitment to protect the heritage of forests and, where necessary, promote adequate programs of reforestation.

**467.** *Responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of mankind, extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future.* “We have inherited from past generations, and we have benefited from the work of our contemporaries: for this reason we have obligations towards all, and we cannot refuse to interest ourselves in those who will come after us, to enlarge the human family”. [984] *This is a responsibility that present generations have towards those of the future,* [985] a responsibility that also concerns individual States and the international community.

**468.** *Responsibility for the environment should also find adequate expression on a juridical level.* It is important that the international community draw up uniform rules that will allow States to exercise more effective control over the various activities that have negative effects on the environment and to protect ecosystems by preventing the risk of accidents. “The State should also actively endeavor within its own territory to prevent destruction of the atmosphere and biosphere, by carefully monitoring, among other things, the impact of new technological or scientific advances ... [and] ensuring that its citizens are not exposed to dangerous pollutants or toxic wastes”. [986]

The juridical content of “*the right to a safe and healthy natural environment*” [987] is gradually taking form, stimulated by the concern shown by public opinion to disciplining the use of created goods according to the demands of the common good and a common desire to punish those who pollute. But juridical measures by themselves are not sufficient. [988] They must be accompanied by a growing sense of responsibility as well as an effective change of mentality and lifestyle.

**469.** *The authorities called to make decisions concerning health and environmental risks sometimes find themselves facing a situation in which available scientific data are contradictory or quantitatively scarce. It may then be appropriate to base evaluations on the “precautionary principle”, which does not mean applying rules but certain guidelines aimed at managing the situation of uncertainty.* This shows the need for making temporary decisions that may be modified on the basis of new facts that eventually become known. Such decisions must be proportional with respect to provisions already taken for other risks. Prudent policies, based on the precautionary principle require that decisions be based on a comparison of the risks and benefits foreseen for the various possible alternatives, including the decision not to intervene. This precautionary approach is connected with the need to encourage every effort for acquiring more thorough knowledge, in the full awareness that science is not able to come to quick conclusions about the absence of risk. The circumstances of uncertainty and provisional solutions make it particularly important that the decision-making process be transparent.

**470.** Programs of economic development must carefully consider “the need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature” [989] because natural resources are limited and some are not renewable. The present rhythm of exploitation is seriously compromising the availability of some natural resources for both the present and the future.[990] Solutions to the ecological problem require that economic activity respect the environment to a greater degree, reconciling the needs of economic development with those of environmental protection. Every economic activity making use of natural resources must also be concerned with safeguarding the environment and should foresee the costs involved, which are “an essential element of the actual cost of economic activity”.[991] In this context, one considers relations between human activity and climate change which, given their extreme complexity, must be opportunely and constantly monitored at the scientific, political and juridical, national and international levels. The climate is a good that must be protected and reminds consumers and those engaged in industrial activity to develop a greater sense of responsibility for their behavior.[992]

*An economy respectful of the environment will not have the maximization of profits as its only objective, because environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits.* The environment is one of those goods that cannot be adequately safeguarded or promoted by market forces.[993] Every country, in particular developed countries, must be aware of the urgent obligation to reconsider the way that natural goods are being used. Seeking innovative ways to reduce the environmental impact of production and consumption of goods should be effectively encouraged.

Particular attention will have to be reserved for the complex issues surrounding *energy resources*.[994] Non-renewable resources, which highly-industrialized and recently-industrialized countries draw from, must be put at the service of all humanity. From a moral perspective based on equity and intergenerational solidarity, it will also be necessary to continue, through the contribution of the scientific community, to identify new sources of energy, develop alternative sources and increase the security levels of nuclear energy.[995] The use of energy, in the context of its relationship to development and the environment, calls for the political responsibility of States, the international community and economic actors. Such responsibility must be illuminated and guided by continual reference to the universal common good.

**471.** The relationship of indigenous peoples to their lands and resources deserves particular attention, since it is a fundamental expression of their identity.[996] Due to powerful agro-industrial interests or the powerful processes of assimilation and urbanization, many of these peoples have already lost or risk losing the lands on which they live,[997] lands tied to the very meaning of their existence.[998] The

rights of indigenous peoples must be appropriately protected.[999] These peoples offer an example of a life lived in harmony with the environment that they have come to know well and to preserve.[1000] Their extraordinary experience, which is an irreplaceable resource for all humanity, runs the risk of being lost together with the environment from which they originate.

#### **b. The use of biotechnology**

**472.** *In recent years pressing questions have been raised with regard to the use of new forms of biotechnology in the areas of agriculture, animal farming, medicine and environmental protection. The new possibilities offered by current biological and biogenetic techniques are a source of hope and enthusiasm on the one hand, and of alarm and hostility on the other.* The application of various types of biotechnology, their acceptability from a moral point of view, their consequences for human health and their impact on the environment and the economy are the subject of thorough study and heated debate. These are controversial questions that involve scientists and researchers, politicians and legislators, economists and environmentalists, as well as producers and consumers. Christians are not indifferent to these problems, for they are aware of the importance of the values at stake.[1001]

**473.** *The Christian vision of creation makes a positive judgment on the acceptability of human intervention in nature, which also includes other living beings, and at the same time makes a strong appeal for responsibility.*[1002] In effect, nature is not a sacred or divine reality that man must leave alone. Rather, it is a gift offered by the Creator to the human community, entrusted to the intelligence and moral responsibility of men and women. For this reason the human person does not commit an illicit act when, out of respect for the order, beauty and usefulness of individual living beings and their function in the ecosystem, he intervenes by modifying some of their characteristics or properties. Human interventions that damage living beings or the natural environment deserve condemnation, while those that improve them are praiseworthy. *The acceptability of the use of biological and biogenetic techniques is only one part of the ethical problem:* as with every human behavior, it is also necessary to evaluate accurately the real benefits as well as the possible consequences in terms of risks. In the realm of technological-scientific interventions that have forceful and widespread impact on living organisms, with the possibility of significant long-term repercussions, it is unacceptable to act lightly or irresponsibly.

**474.** *Modern biotechnologies have powerful social, economic and political impact locally, nationally and internationally. They need to be evaluated according to the ethical criteria that must always guide human activities and relations in the social, economic and political spheres.*[1003] *Above all the criteria of justice and solidarity must be taken into account.* Individuals and groups who engage in research and the commercialization of the field of biotechnology must especially abide by these criteria. In any event, one must avoid falling into the error of believing that only the spreading of the benefits connected with the new techniques of biotechnology can solve the urgent problems of poverty and underdevelopment that still afflict so many countries on the planet.

**475.** *In a spirit of international solidarity, various measures can be taken in relation to the use of new biotechnologies.* In the first place, *equitable commercial exchange, without the burden of unjust stipulations,* is to be facilitated. Promoting the development of the most disadvantaged peoples, however, will not be authentic or effective if it is reduced to the simple exchange of products. It is indispensable to foster *the development of a necessary scientific and technological autonomy* on the part of these same peoples, promoting *the exchange of scientific and technological knowledge and the transfer of technologies to developing countries.*

**476.** *Solidarity also means appealing to the responsibility of developing countries, and in particular of their political leaders, for promoting trade policies that are favorable to their peoples and the exchange of technology that can improve the conditions of their food supply and health.* In such countries, there must be an increase in research investment, with special attention to the particular characteristics and needs of their territory and population, above all by bearing in mind that some research in the area of biotechnology, which may be potentially beneficial, requires relatively modest investments. To this end it would be useful to establish national agencies responsible for protecting the common good by means of careful risk management.

**477.** Scientists and technicians involved in the field of biotechnology are called to work intelligently and with perseverance in seeking the best solutions to the serious and urgent problems of food supply and health care. They must not forget that their activity concerns material — both living and inanimate — that belongs to the patrimony of humanity and is destined also to future generations. For believers, it is a question of a gift received from the Creator and entrusted to human intelligence and freedom, which are themselves also gifts from heaven. It is hoped that scientists employ their energies and abilities in research characterized by enthusiasm and guided by a clear and honest conscience.[1004]

**478.** *Entrepreneurs and directors of public agencies involved in the research, production and selling of products derived from new biotechnologies must take into account not only legitimate profit but also the common good.* This principle, which holds true for every type of economic activity, becomes particularly important for activities that deal with the food supply, medicine, health care and the environment. By their decisions, entrepreneurs and public agency directors involved in this sector can guide developments in the area of biotechnologies towards very promising ends as far as concerns the fight against hunger, especially in poorer countries, the fight against disease and the fight to safeguard the ecosystem, the common patrimony of all.

**479.** *Politicians, legislators and public administrators are responsible for evaluating the potentials benefits and possible risks connected with the use of biotechnologies.* It is not desirable for their decisions, at the national or international level, to be dictated by pressure from special interest groups. Public authorities must also encourage a correctly informed public opinion and make decisions that are best-suited to the common good.

**480.** *Leaders in the information sector also have an important task, which must be undertaken with prudence and objectivity.* Society expects information that is complete and objective, which helps citizens to form a correct opinion concerning biotechnological products, above all because this is something that directly concerns them as possible consumers. The temptation to fall into superficial information, fuelled by over enthusiasm or unjustified alarmism, must be avoided.

### **c. The environment and the sharing of goods**

**481.** As regards the ecological question, the social doctrine of the Church reminds us that the goods of the earth were created by God to be used wisely by all. They must be shared equitably, in accordance with justice and charity. This is essentially a question of preventing the injustice of hoarding resources: greediness, be it individual or collective, is contrary to the order of creation.[1005] Modern ecological problems are of a planetary dimension and can be effectively resolved only through international cooperation capable of guaranteeing greater coordination in the use of the earth's resources.

**482.** *The environmental crisis and poverty are connected by a complex and dramatic set of causes that can be resolved by the principle of the universal destination of goods, which offers a fundamental moral and cultural orientation.* The present environmental crisis affects those who are poorest in a particular way, whether they live in those lands subject to erosion and desertification, are involved in armed conflicts or subject to forced immigration, or because they do not have the economic and technological means to protect themselves from other calamities.

Countless numbers of these poor people live in polluted suburbs of large cities, in make-shift residences or in huge complexes of crumbling and unsafe houses (*slums, bidonvilles, barrios, favelas*). In cases where it is necessary to relocate them, in order not to heap suffering upon suffering, adequate information needs to be given beforehand, with choices of decent housing offered, and the people directly involved must be part of the process.

It is moreover necessary to keep in mind the situation of those countries that are penalized by unfair international trade regulations and countries with a scarcity of capital goods, often aggravated by the burden of the foreign debt. In such cases hunger and poverty make it virtually impossible to avoid an intense and excessive exploitation of the environment.

**483.** *The close link that exists between the development of the poorest countries, demographic changes and a sustainable use of the environment must not become a pretext for political and economic choices that are at variance with the dignity of the human person.* In developed countries there is a “drop in the birth-rates, with repercussions on the aging of the population, unable even to renew itself biologically”.<sup>[1006]</sup> The situation is different in the developing countries where demographic changes are increasing. Although it is true that an uneven distribution of the population and of available resources creates obstacles to development and a sustainable use of the environment, it must nonetheless be recognized that demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development.<sup>[1007]</sup> “There is widespread agreement that a population policy is only one part of an overall development strategy. Accordingly, it is important that any discussion of population policies should keep in mind the actual and projected development of nations and regions. At the same time, it is impossible to leave out of account the very nature of what is meant by the term ‘development’. All development worthy of the name must be integral, that is, it must be directed to the true good of every person and of the whole person”.<sup>[1008]</sup>

**484.** *The principle of the universal destination of goods also applies naturally to water, considered in the Sacred Scriptures as a symbol of purification (cf. Ps 51:4; Jn 13:8) and of life (cf. Jn 3:5; Gal 3:27).* “As a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival; thus, everyone has a right to it”.<sup>[1009]</sup> Satisfying the needs of all, especially of those who live in poverty, must guide the use of water and the services connected with it. Inadequate access to safe drinking water affects the well-being of a huge number of people and is often the cause of disease, suffering, conflicts, poverty and even death. For a suitable solution to this problem, it “must be set in context in order to establish moral criteria based precisely on the value of life and the respect for the rights and dignity of all human beings”.<sup>[1010]</sup>

**485.** By its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many, and it must be used rationally and in solidarity with others. The distribution of water is traditionally among the responsibilities that fall to public agencies, since water is considered a public good. If water distribution is entrusted to the private sector it should still be considered a public good. *The right to water*,<sup>[1011]</sup> as all human rights, finds its basis in human dignity and not in any kind of merely quantitative assessment

that considers water as a merely economic good. Without water, life is threatened. Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right.

#### **d. New lifestyles**

**486.** *Serious ecological problems call for an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles,*[1012] “in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of the common good are the factors that determine consumer choices, savings and investments”. [1013] These lifestyles should be inspired by sobriety, temperance, and self-discipline at both the individual and social levels. There is a need to break with the logic of mere consumption and promote forms of agricultural and industrial production that respect the order of creation and satisfy the basic human needs of all. These attitudes, sustained by a renewed awareness of the interdependence of all the inhabitants of the earth, will contribute to eliminating the numerous causes of ecological disasters as well as guaranteeing the ability to respond quickly when such disasters strike peoples and territories.[1014] The ecological question must not be faced solely because of the frightening prospects that environmental destruction represents; rather it must above all become a strong motivation for an authentic solidarity of worldwide dimensions.

**487.** *The attitude that must characterize the way man acts in relation to creation is essentially one of gratitude and appreciation; the world, in fact, reveals the mystery of God who created and sustains it.* If the relationship with God is placed aside, nature is stripped of its profound meaning and impoverished. If on the other hand, nature is rediscovered in its creaturely dimension, channels of communication with it can be established, its rich and symbolic meaning can be understood, allowing us to enter into its realm of *mystery*. This realm opens the path of man to God, Creator of heaven and earth. *The world presents itself before man's eyes as evidence of God*, the place where his creative, providential and redemptive power unfolds.