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THE CHURCH'S POSITION AS REGARD TO THE ECOLOGY ISSUE

Introduction

Many a time has the Church raised environmental issues in its teaching. The basic assumption concerning the respect for the natural environment are the biblical words that God created the world out of nothing, and man was made in the image and likeness of God. Earthly goods are at our disposal as a gift from the Creator. However, they should be used wisely because, being the heirs of past centuries, we have obligations to future generations.

The responsibility we have towards the environment is closely related to the duties we have towards the human person. If the right to life is not respected, the notion of environmental protection is lost as a consequence¹. The Church is against those ecological movements that intend to assign divine rank to Nature itself. The Church also rejects the concepts that try to change the ethical paradigm of human dignity and thus allow for equal status of humans and animals.²

Taking into account the above, we will try to present in the article the ecological ideas included in teaching of the Church. First, we will introduce the very concept of ecology, showing its biblical context. Then we will discuss the position of the Church on the protection of the natural environment and human ecology. Finally, we will discuss the issue of environmental education.

Understanding ecology

In the natural sense, ecology (Greek: *oikos* + *lógos* = home + science) is a science dealing with relations between living organisms and their natural habitat, taking into account the mutual relations between these organisms. In the

¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, Rome 2005, no. 51.

² Cf. W. Bołoz, *Kościół i ekologia. W obronie człowieka i środowiska naturalnego*, Warszawa 2010, p. 29.

broader meaning of this term, ecology means the state of nature and the human environment, the theory and practice of environmental protection and the world view of ecological movements.³ Ecology is "a scientific discipline dealing with the integrated economy of animate and inanimate nature as an inseparable whole. It extends the old concepts of nature management to include human requirements, making man the central point of reference in ecology".⁴

The term "ecology" was introduced by the German biologist and evolutionist Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). Literally, the phrase means learning about organisms in "their home", in their native environment. As understood by its initiator, ecology is a science dealing with the home of an individual organism (or organisms), i.e. its environment, which includes all inanimate components surrounding it (or the group of them) and other living organisms.⁵ Ecology is not the study of a single organism, but it deals with the biology of entire groups of organisms and their connections with the environment in which they live.⁶

He issue of ecology includes also "human ecology". It deals with the study and description of the environment of a human being, i.e. the environment that allows him to live and develop his vocation, that is his integral development. In such an environment, three basic elements are distinguished: nature, society and the person⁷ himself. The term "human ecology" was used for the first time in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* by John Paul II, who draws attention to "the dangerous destruction of the human environment, caused by the fact that too little attention is paid to protection of the moral conditions of the true human ecology". The Pope noted that apart from the irrational destruction of the natural environment, *the human environment* is also in danger of being destroyed. "Not only was Earth given to man by God so that they could use it with respect for the originally intended good [...], but man is also a gift for himself received from God, and therefore he must respect the natural and moral structure with which has been endowed with."⁸

³ Cf. M. Fiałkowski, *Ekologia*, in: *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*, ed. R. Kamiński, W. Przygoda, M. Fiałkowski, Lublin 2006, p. 235.

⁴ M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Ekologia*, in: *Jan Paweł II. Encyklopedia Nauczania Moralnego*, ed. J. Nagórny, K. Jeżyna, Radom 2005, p. 169.

⁵ Cf. M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Ekologia ludzka. Osoba i jej środowisko z perspektywy teologiczno-moralnej*, Lublin 2007, p. 24.

⁶ Cf. M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Ekologia ludzka. Osoba i jej środowisko...*, op. cit., pp. 24-25.

⁷ Cf. M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Ekologia ludzka. Osoba i jej środowisko...*, op. cit., p. 55.

⁸ John Paul II, *Centesimus annos*, AAS 83 (1991), No. 38.

Ecology in the Theology of the Creation

The Bible answers the question about the existence of the world in the first sentence: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" (Genesis 1:1). God brought the world into existence out of nothing. The words from the book of Maccabee (2 Mch 7:28)⁹ illustrate vividly that the human race came into being in the same way.

In the text, the conviction is expressed that God created the world out of nothing and the world consists of heaven and earth, which are symbols of the two basic factors of the created reality: spiritual and material. By the will of the Creator, both elements are combined in man, who has become the crown of all the creation.¹⁰ At the pinnacle of the Creation (Genesis 1:31), the Creator places man. "He made him in His own image and likeness. He entrusted all the splendour of the world to him, so that by enjoying it and using its goods, in a free and rational way, he would cooperate in a creative way in the perfecting of God's work".¹¹

God intended man to become His partner in a dialogue. For only in a dialogue with God does a human being find the truth from which he draws inspiration and norms for planning the future of the world, *the garden* given to him by God to be cultivated and looked after (cf. Gen 2:15). Even a sin does not eliminate this task, although the noble activity of work is burdened with toil and suffering (cf. Gen 3: 17-19).¹²

However, when we talk about the world's participation in the effects of human sin, we realize that this world could not be deprived of God's promise of redemption either. Jesus is the firstborn of all the Creation (cf. Col 1:15). Everything what have been created is eternally in Him. If He comes into the world, He comes to call His own (cf. Jn 1:11). He comes to embrace everything that have been created anew, to initiate the work of redeeming the world, to restore the Creation's original holiness and dignity. The act of His coming itself shows us the special dignity of created nature.¹³

Salvation is understood as a *new Creation*. It will restore that harmony and ability of growth that have been destroyed by sin. God says: "I am creating new heavens and a new earth" (Is 65:17). "Then a desert will become an orchard...

⁹ Cf. X. Léon-Dufour, *Słownik teologii biblijnej*, Poznań 1990, p. 909.

¹⁰ Cf. W. Bołoz, *Kościół i ekologia...*, op. cit. p. 14.

¹¹ Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie wygłoszone podczas Liturgii Słowa* (Zamość, 12 VI 1999), No. 3.

¹² Cf. Papieska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej Kościoła*, Kielce 2005, No. 452.

¹³ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *Przemówienie wygłoszone podczas Liturgii Słowa...*, op. cit., No. 3.

and justice will dwell in the garden... My people will dwell in the capital of peace" (Is 32: 15-18).¹⁴

In Jesus, man and the world have been reconciled with God, what enable every human being, aware of God's love, to find the lost peace: "So if anyone remains in Christ, he is a new creature. The old has passed, behold, all has come new"(2 Cor 5:17).¹⁵

Environmental Ecology

Man can perceive the natural environment in different ways. A Christian should remember that nature is at our disposal not as "a pile of randomly scattered refuse", but as a gift of the Creator who laid down its internal laws, so that man may draw from them appropriate instructions to "cultivate and keep it" (cf. Gen 2, 15).¹⁶

On the other hand, it must also be emphasized that treating nature as more important than a human being himself is against the true development. Such a position leads to neopagan attitudes or to new pantheism. Human salvation cannot come only from nature that is understood in a purely naturalistic sense.¹⁷

The Magisterium of the Church has expressed its opposition to the concept of an environment inspired by ecocentrism and bio-centrism, because they assume the elimination of the ontological and axiological difference between man and other living beings, treating the biosphere as a biotic unit of undifferentiated value. In this way, the supreme responsibility of man is eliminated and replaced by egalitarianism, thus the equal "dignity" of all living beings.¹⁸

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church read: "While on the one hand the correct concept of the environment must not reduce nature to an ordinary object of manipulation and exploitation, on the other hand it should not absolutize it and exalt it beyond the dignity of a human being. In the latter case, it comes to the point where either nature or the earth is attributed divinity, which can be easily seen in the example of some ecological movements that demand that their concepts be given an institutional profile guaranteed at the international level".¹⁹

¹⁴ Papińska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej...*, op. cit., No. 452.

¹⁵ Ibidem, No. 454.

¹⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est...*, op. cit., No. 48.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Discorso ai partecipanti ad un Convegno su ambiente e salute* (Vatican, 24 III 1997), 5; Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II, XX, 1 (1997) 522; after: Papińska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej...*, op. cit., No. 463.

¹⁹ Cf. Papińska Rada Kultury – Papińska Rada do Spraw Dialogu Międzyreligijnego,

There is room for everyone on Earth: "Here, the whole human family should find the riches necessary for a dignified life - with the help of Nature itself, which is a gift from God to his children, and through their own contribution of work and enterprise. However, we should consider it a very serious duty to pass the land to new generations in such a state that they also could inhabit it with dignity and continue to cultivate it".²⁰

Hence, to believers, nature appears to be miraculous fruits of God's creative action. Man is allowed to use it responsibly, respecting the inner balance of the very creation.²¹

Human Ecology

There is a close relationship between environmental ecology and human ecology.²² Our duties to the environment go hand in hand with our responsibilities to a person. Benedict XVI emphasizes that the Church, taking responsibility for the creation, above all should protect man from destroying himself. Something like human ecology, understood properly, is essential. Pope Francis notes that "the source of human danger is not only economic issues, but also ethical and anthropological and the dominant economic and financial dynamics deprived of ethics."²³ "When in the society *human ecology* is respected, environmental ecology benefits from it, as well."²⁴

The decisive problem for nature conservation is the overall moral attitude. "If the rights to life and to natural death are not respected, if human conception, pregnancy and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed for research purposes, then awareness of both the concept of human ecology and the notion of environmental ecology are finally commonly lost".²⁵

Pope Francis states with concern: "When it comes to the *right to life*, it must be clearly stated that in our community the life extermination is committed: alongside the victims of armed conflicts, terrorism and various forms of violence, there are victims of silent death caused by hunger, abortion, experiments on embryos and euthanasia. Abortion and embryo experiments are in direct con-

Jezus Chrystus dawcą wody żywej. Chrześcijańska refleksja na temat «New Age», Kraków 2003, pp. 37-38; after: Papieska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej...*, op. cit., No. 463.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est...*, op. cit., No. 50.

²¹ Ibidem, No. 48.

²² Cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical Centesimus Annus*, 38: AAS 83 (1991) 841.

²³ Franciszek, Przemówienie na audiencji ogólnej (Watykan, 6 VI 2013), *Poszanowanie środowiska i budowanie międzyludzkiej solidarności*, www.niedziela.pl/arttykul/5121/.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est...*, op. cit., No. 51.

²⁵ Ibidem.

trast to the attitude of openness to others, that is necessary to build long-term and peaceful relationships".²⁶

In his opinion, this is due to the fact that "a human life, a person, are no longer perceived as fundamental values that must be respected and protected, especially when one is weak or disabled, or not needed yet - like the one who is to be born, or it is no longer needed - like an old man".²⁷

In the face of the threat to human life, the appeal of Benedict XVI becomes essential: "We must preserve the human heritage of society. This heritage of values has its source and is written down in the natural moral law, which forms the basis of respect for a human being and the created world".²⁸

Ecological Education

Respecting the natural environment is possible thanks to upbringing, especially of children and adolescents. Thanks to it, it is possible to shape attitudes of responsibility for the world and people around us. The formation achieved by experiencing nature, for example practicing ecotourism, is also important.

Responsibility for the Environment

In the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* John Paul II writes that "environmental protection is a challenge for all the omankind: it is a common and universal obligation to respect the collective good".²⁹ It is important to be aware that "you cannot use various kinds of beings, whether living or inanimate ones - natural ingredients, plants, animals, - with impunity, in any way, that suits your own economic needs".³⁰

Responsibility for the environment includes not only the requirements of the present, but also extends to the future: "We, who are the heirs of past centuries and reap the fruits of our contemporaries' work, have obligations to all people. For this reason, it is not honest of us to give up all our concern for those who will extend the human family in the future, after our death. The fact that all people are related to one another not only benefits us but also results in our duties"³¹. It is about the responsibility that current generations bear towards

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace* (Vatican, 1 I 2007), No. 5.

²⁷ Francis, *Speech at the General Audience* (Vatican, 6 VI 2013).

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Message for World Day of Peace* (Vatican, 1 I 2010), No. 12.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Encyclical Centesimus Annus*, 40: AAS 83 (1991) 843.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Encyclical Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 34: AAS 80 (1988) 559.

³¹ Paul VI, *Encyclical Populorum Progressio*, 17: AAS 59 (1967) 266; cf. John Paul II, *Encyclical Centesimus Annus...*, op. cit., 37 AS 83 (1991) 840.

future ones, and also about the responsibility of individual states and the international community.³²

Responsibility for the natural environment should be properly translated on the legal level. It is important for the international community to develop unified rules that would allow states to control more effectively various activities that have negative impact on the environment and protect ecosystems by anticipating the cases that may possibly occur.³³

Every economic entity that uses natural resources should also take care of environmental protection. This entails the prediction of costs which should be considered as "one of the most important items in expenditure on economic activity".³⁴ "All countries, especially the developed ones, ought to recognize the urgent need to rethink how natural resources are used. The search for new solutions capable of reducing the negative impact of production and consumption on the environment should be effectively developed".³⁵

Also in the field of ecology, social studies remind us that earthly goods were created by God for all people to use prudently; these goods should be properly shared: fairly and with love.³⁶ In essence, it is about preventing unfair speculation on resources; greed, whether individual or collective, is against the order of creation.³⁷

The ecological issue should not be raised solely because of the unfavourable prospects for the mankind as a result of environmental degradation. It must be expressed, above all, in a determined commitment to genuine solidarity on a global scale.³⁸

Shaping Pro-ecological Attitudes

Environmental education is possible when a person makes a decision about his personal change. It is possible through improving oneself in virtues, i.e. the gift of oneself.³⁹ The duty to care for the environment is performed through small daily activities that shape a certain lifestyle. Training in being responsible for the natural environment is essential and the patterns of behaviour that have

³² Cf. Papiéska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej...*, op. cit., No. 467.

³³ Ibidem, No. 468.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Allocuzione alla XXV Sessione dell Conferenza della FAO*. [Speech on the Occasion of the XXV Session of the FAO Conference], 8 (16 XI 1989): AAS 82 (1990) 673.

³⁵ Papiéska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej...*, op. cit., No. 468.

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes*, No. 69.

³⁸ Cf. Papiéska Rada Iustitia et Pax, *Kompendium nauki społecznej...*, op. cit., No. 481.

³⁹ Cf. Francis, *Laudato si'...*, op. cit., No. 211.

the desired result for nature protection are preferable, i.e. avoiding the use of plastics and paper, or segregating waste.

There are different educational areas: school, family, media, catechesis and others. The family, however, plays a central role because it is "the place where the life, a gift from God, can be properly welcomed and protected from numerous attacks it is exposed to." The family is the centre of the life culture. It is the family where the first habits of love and care for life are cultivated. It is the place of integral formation and personal maturation.⁴⁰

In ecological education, it is essential to shape consciences. This task belongs to the Church, all Christian communities, politics and various associations. Education for responsible asceticism also applies to clerical seminaries and religious formation houses. From the human ecology point of view, sensitivity to those in need is very important, too.⁴¹

It is worth remembering that behaviour is influenced by the way of thinking. Deep changes in the approach to the environment are possible by shaping attitudes towards society and its relationship with Nature. If this does not happen, the consumer model, imposed by market mechanisms and the media, will continue to develop.⁴²

Ecological education should be a lifelong process. It must provide reliable knowledge about the hopes and threats resulting from the civilization development, and shape human attitudes in such a way that his participation in scientific and technological progress does not destroy harmony with the environment, but guarantees the coexistence of man and Nature.⁴³

An important element of education is shaping social awareness and pro-ecological attitudes.

This consists in explaining the role of a healthy environment in its natural, family, social and psychological dimensions. Man is closely related to the environment, hence a sick environment means a sick person. Education can be carried out using various methods, ranging from explaining the essence of biological and medical phenomena, the sense of interfering with Nature, through a good example showing the correct and inappropriate treatment of Nature.⁴⁴

Taking into account the religious aspect of ecological formation, the great richness of Christian spirituality should be emphasized. It constitutes a great

⁴⁰ Ibidem, No. 213.

⁴¹ Ibidem, No. 214.

⁴² Ibidem, No. 215.

⁴³ Cf. A. Latawiec, *Edukacja ekologiczna dziś*, in: *Ochrona środowiska społeczno-przyrodniczego w filozofii i teologii*, ed. J.M. Dołęga, J.W. Czartoszewski, A. Skowroński, Warszawa 2001, p. 168.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 168.

contribution to shaping people's attitudes.⁴⁵ Nature should be an object of admiration and contemplation. For it is a mirror of the world, in which "the Creator's Covenant with the Creation" is reflected.⁴⁶ It should be mentioned that "any honest approach to the ecological issue must also take into account the perspective of conversion and reconciliation.

Analogously, we can speak about an ecological conversion. It would be a particularly obliging attitude, related to the change of mentality, with a new way of evaluating and approaching the ecological issue. Ecological conversion is an effort to develop permanent pro-ecological attitudes. This requires formation of the ecological conscience, therefore a conscience that is sensitive to pro-ecological values".⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Church's teaching on the ecological issue is multifaceted. It includes the understanding of ecology in terms of natural environmental protection and human ecology. It should be emphasized that the biblical aspect is important for understanding ecology. God brought the world into existence out of nothing. He also made man in His image and likeness. Man is a partner in a dialogue with God and thus he can reach the truth. It is in Christ who restores man's original holiness.

Nature was given to man to "cultivate and care for it" (cf. Gen 2:15). However, it is not more important than a person, because man is the "crown" of creation. There is room for everyone on Earth, and everyone should find here the riches necessary for life. However, we cannot forget about the next generations that will come after our death.

Our duties towards the environment are closely related to the duties towards the human person. Also, responsibility for the creation requires care so that man would not destroy himself. Basically, it is about respecting life from the moment of conception to natural death. Respect for "human ecology" corresponds to environmental ecology. It is also important to review your lifestyle. The emphasis is put on living according to the paradigm: "more to be" than "to have". It is also necessary to strive for a relationship with God, because he gives joy and peace of mind. The lack of reference to the Transcendence impoverishes man's identity and alienates him.

⁴⁵ Cf. Francis, *Laudato si'...*, op. cit., No. 216.

⁴⁶ Cf. Jan Paweł II, *List do młodych całego świata z okazji Międzynarodowego Roku Młodzieży* (Watykan, 31 III 1985), p. 14, after: J. Łukomski, *Relacja człowieka do środowiska naturalnego w ujęciu chrześcijańskim...*, op. cit., p. 220.

⁴⁷ J. Gocko, *Moralno-społeczne aspekty kwestii ekologicznej*, „Człowiek i przyroda” 1999, nr 10, pp. 78-79.

Developing the ecological ethos requires education. Many entities are responsible for education to respect the natural environment, and the most important among them is the family. Generally, the change of attitudes related to the new valuation method is emphasized, which significantly influences the approach to the ecological issue.

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Streszczenie

Kościół wobec kwestii ekologicznej

Nauczanie Kościoła dotyczące kwestii ekologicznej jest wieloaspektowe. Obejmuje one rozumienie ekologii w wymiarze ochrony środowiska przyrodniczego oraz ekologii człowieka. Należy podkreślić, że istotne znaczenie dla rozumienia ekologii ma aspekt biblijny. Bóg powołał świat do istnienia z niczego. Uczynił też człowieka na swój obraz i podobieństwo. Człowiek jest partnerem w dialogu z Bogiem i w ten sposób może odnaleźć prawdę. Jest ona w Chrystusie, który przywraca człowiekowi pierwotną świętość.

Przyroda (natura) została dana człowiekowi, by ją „uprawiać i doglądać” (por. Rdz 2, 15). Nie jest ona jednak ważniejsza od osoby, dlatego że to człowiek jest „ko-

roną” stworzenia. Na ziemi jest miejsce dla wszystkich i na niej powinien każdy znaleźć bogactwa konieczne do życia. Nie można jednak zapominać o następnych pokoleniach, które przyjdą po naszej śmierci.

Obowiązki wobec środowiska są ściśle związane z powinnościami wobec osoby ludzkiej. Odpowiedzialność za stworzenie domaga się także troski, aby człowiek nie zniszczył samego siebie. Chodzi zasadniczo o poszanowanie życia od momentu poczęcia do naturalnej śmierci. Szacunek wobec „ekologii ludzkiej” przekłada się na ekologię środowiska.

Wypracowanie etosu ekologicznego domaga się edukacji. Za wychowanie do szacunku wobec środowiska naturalnego jest odpowiedzialnych wiele podmiotów, a wśród nich najważniejsza jest rodzina. Generalnie podkreśla się zmianę postaw związaną z nowym sposobem wartościowania, które istotnie wpływa na podejście do kwestii ekologicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie Kościoła, ekologia, człowiek, Księga Rodzaju (Pismo św.), środowisko, wychowanie, edukacja

Summary

The Church's Position as Regard to the Ecology Issue

The Church's teaching on the ecological issue is multifaceted. It includes the understanding of ecology in terms of environmental protection and human ecology. It should be emphasized that the biblical aspect is important for understanding ecology. God brought the world into existence out of nothing. He also made man in His image and likeness. Man is a partner in the dialogue with God and thus he can reach the truth. It is in Christ who restores man's original holiness.

Nature was given to man to „cultivate and care for it” (cf. Gen 2:15). However, it is not more important than a person, because man is the „crown” of the creation. There is room for everyone on Earth, and everyone should find here the riches necessary for life. However, we cannot forget about the next generations that will come after our death.

Duties to the environment are closely related to duties towards a human person. Responsibility for the creation also requires care so that man would not destroy himself. It is essentially about respecting life from the moment of conception to natural death. Respect for „human ecology” corresponds to environmental ecology.

Developing the ecological ethos requires education. Many entities are responsible for education to respect the natural environment, and the most important among them is the family. Generally, the change of attitudes related to the new valuation method is emphasized, which significantly influences the approach to the ecological issue.

Keywords: teaching of the Church, ecology, man, Genesis (Scripture), environment, education, education

Nota o Autorze

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