

HUMAN ECOLOGY

Human ecology is a term that has been used for over a hundred years in disciplines as diverse as geography, biology, ecology, sociology, psychology, urbanism and economy. It migrated through all these as a particular field and never developed into a discipline, although its multidisciplinary nature has been valued. In 1991, Pope John Paul II used it for the first time in the Magisterium, in *Centesimus Annus*, applying it to the whole of the environment and conditions conducive to the healthy life, development and fulfillment of the human person. This seems a providential perspective to bring together and make relevant and appealing to current social debates, the richness of the Catholic view of the human person and its social teachings.

The concern for the environment has kept growing at an accelerated pace over the last five decades. The impact of human action, due to its sheer numbers and the increasing reach of technology is one of the most important factors introducing changes in ecosystems globally. As this became more evident, and issues of polluted waterways, acid rain and depletion of the ozone layer became more obviously damaging to

human populations, the developed nations took initiative to curtail some of the causes in terms of human activity, particularly industrial production. The proposed measures would seriously limit the capacity of developing nations to grow their economies and thus condemned their population to remain at inadequate conditions of survival, besides other controversial inequities. This was considered unacceptable and a new approach was deemed necessary.

The international community appears to eventually have found agreement around sustainable development (SD) as a foundational premise of international governance. But there is no consensus about the meaning of its three components: Social development, Economic development and Environmental protection. The concept of human ecology as proposed by Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI can contribute to clarify and reconcile these controversial issues.

To begin with environmental protection, there are deep differences surrounding the meaning and nature of the environment and the role played by humans. The Christian tradition

places humans at the center of God's created environment and confers both rights and duties on humans. In God's created environment humans have a right to use nature but also a duty to care for it. They must be the stewards of nature, not only for utilitarian reasons, but above all in furtherance of God's Plan by cherishing and nurturing a flourishing environment in which all creatures fulfill God's plan and give him glory.

By contrast, modernism –roughly defined as a secular socio-cultural and philosophical movement of industrial and post-industrial society- tended to be skewed anthropocentric. The environment was seen almost exclusively from a human utilitarian perspective. Man exercised power and dominion over nature, subject only to the prudential requirement that human intervention should enable the survival of the human species. From such a perspective, an ethic transcending the maximization of human's earthly happiness is irrelevant. Man achieves fulfillment by pursuing his own happiness or welfare, by exercising his reason and will, unfettered by external ethical constraints.

The post modern approach, while affirming the autonomy of the human, is less confident about the power of man's reason and will. It asserts

that the world of nature, or the environment, exists to support both human and non-human life, like animals, plants and other ecosystems. As these non-human life forms have a right to live and be sustained, nature needs to be sustained as a life support system for all life, not just for human utility or efficiency. In some cases this has led to a biocentrism in which nature does not exist simply to be used or consumed by humans, but that humans are just one species amongst many, and are not "superior" in a moral, ethical or any other objective sense. This view is of course, wholly contrary to the anthropocentrism of modernism.

In this context, some authors present the Christian tradition of asserting the dominion of the creation as the culprit for the exploitation of the environment. However, the influence of the enlightenment's view of instrumental reason and freedom, as well as the individualist protestant ethics and theology, in corrupting the harmonious relation with nature that prevailed the previous seventeen centuries is a more probable cause. Others have taken a different perspective or narrative, even labeling humans as a pest that needs to be eliminated or at least, contained, but they all share a common biological view of nature that denies primacy to humans.

The Economic development component of SD has suffered the absence of a human and ethical dimension. Its philosophical underpinnings create distortions within the economic models themselves and also in the idea that they can function autonomously without the ethical considerations of the humans involved. Ideological positions tied to capitalism and the market, defend the current model. The economy is seen as having its dynamic and laws that cannot be contradicted and often becomes an idol to whom many human values and entire populations are subordinated and sacrificed with fatalism as collateral damage. Ethics and solidarity are dismissed as non rational considerations that distort a model that can only work reliably on self interest. However, if we talk about sustainability, the growth paradigm is the elephant in the room.

The frenzy for growth in quarterly profits, volume of sales, market share and any relevant indicator feeds speculation, short term strategies and unfettered consumerism. Businesses need to sell more goods and services regardless of actual needs. This fosters wasteful use of raw materials and natural resources, excessive debt and more waste to be dumped or recycled. All this needs more energy and increases the fuel

burnt and the carbon dumped on the environment.

Societies in developed nations are not willing to change the consumerist lifestyle that fuels this aimless growth, which as it raises prices of energy and other resources, takes them out of reach of poorer nations. Aid to developing nations is often given within a top down approach of development that relies on finances and technology, neglecting other critical factors for success such as subsidiarity and sustainability that allow communities to be naturally involved in the process. In some cases the developed world seeks to condition economic development to the acceptance of its own secular values and policies without respect for the local cultures. Ultimately in question is the teleology of economics. Economics should serve the common good by efficiently allocating resources to provide a standard of living for the human person and this is in turn ordered to the human's transcendent purpose. Instead, economy is oriented to self perpetuating material ends.

The social development of SD recognizes that the well being of the human person cannot be reduced to economic development. The 1992 Rio Conference acknowledged that "human

beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.” The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) highlight issues of health, education and gender equality, besides the economic issues of poverty and development. This is a step in the right direction, but falls short of an authentic development that integrates the human dimension. It leaves untouched many issues relevant to the dignity and destiny of the human person, which should be considered in any development that is truly human.

In the prevailing view of political organization, a concept of human freedom, as autonomy detached from truth, has fostered a lifestyle centered in self satisfaction that not only ignores ethics and social responsibility but actually regards them as threats to a free society. Equal opportunity often masks a neo-darwinism that justifies ignoring the needs of the less fortunate. Approaches to human needs such as that of Maslow state that the important needs are the basic material ones, such as food, shelter and basic goods and services, implying that cultural, relational and spiritual needs are “nice to have”, but ultimately a luxury that most people can do without. Post modernism as expressed in secular liberalism promotes a public space

where political and economic issues can be discussed so as to allow individual freedom, but one in which religious beliefs that should form a key part of that freedom, are denied their freedom of expression. On the other hand, individual rights based on gender ideology are seen as overriding the protection of life and family. The common good; the universal destination of goods of the earth and human agency; and the inter-generational and intra-generational solidarity are hardly acknowledged as duties.

Catholic Human Ecology can contribute to clarify, reconcile, and find a path of resolution to most of the conflicts that undermine Sustainable Development by:

- Building a space and method for dialogue that allows men and women of good will from different intellectual, cultural and faith persuasions to interact and cooperate towards the common goal of SD; such as in Benedict’s speeches in Regensburg, La Sapienza and the German Parliament .
- Providing an account of the human person and nature that allows to integrate them and their well-being harmoniously in a way that gives sense and meaning; a way

to understand and recognize order and purpose, and along with this, mystery and beauty, relationality with God and others; all integrated in solidarity and harmony that point toward communion;

- Providing the moral and spiritual persuasion to engage people in the reverent and dedicated care for the environment, and the conviction to undergo the costs and sacrifices it might involve;
- Providing an understanding of the relations between the economy, human progress - including the role of solidarity and subsidiarity- and the care for the environment and for the ordering the social space;
- Moving the discussion of social issues from the individual and his rights, to the common good of the human ecology that we all shape with our actions and in which we all flourish or wither.