

VATICAN ACTIVITIES FOR SAFEGUARDING CREATION

I. Introduction

I am glad to be here among you, and very grateful to Creatio for giving me this opportunity to share some reflections:

- On Creation in an event organized by Creatio. It is really a pleasure because I know that such an important event is rooted in the continuous field and educational work done by Creatio, which I became familiar when I met and had discussions with some of the staff of Creatio in Peru and the United States.
- On environment in Rio, Brazil:
 - Almost one year after the “Rio+20 UN Conference” where environmental issues were discussed
 - Just before a new edition of the World Youth Days where the talk of the environment will certainly have a prominent role, especially with Pope Francis
 - In a country with so many environmental challenges and opportunities!

I hope my talk will contribute to a better understanding of the Vatican’s role concerning Creation.

I would like to start with a clear statement: I am not, we are not here for “greenwashing”. The idea «the Church is seeking a good and green image» is false and misleading. For example, we cannot accept statements such as «At least, the Church is doing something on ecology...» or « the Church is preaching ecology in order to regain believers and consensus... or to modernize». Those ideas must be discarded, especially within the catholic cultural sphere. Since we, Catholics believe our Creator has mandated the whole human race to be stewards of creation, the Church has always promoted the respect for the environment. There is a continuous and logical thread from the *Genesis*, to *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Canticle of Creatures* by Saint Francis of Assisi, Blessed John Paul II’s *Message for the World Day of Peace of 1990* and finally § 55 of Pope Francis’s recent encyclical *Lumen Fidei* to buttress this point. It is therefore wrong for one to suggest that the Church only commenced discussing environmental issues once they became “à la mode”: during the increase of an undeniable

ecological crisis, or after the release of some alarming reports concerning climate change.

Guided by the wisdom of God-Creator, the Church has always promoted the respect for the Earth, entrusted to humans. We cannot accept/approve any arrogant or restrictive visions of its role in this field. Such visions are emblematic of who misunderstands the commandment of the “dominion” over the Earth written in the *Genesis* or who perceives the Church as a mere charitable NGO¹ or «an organizational need»,² terms used by Pope Francis to warn us.

My contribution is divided in four parts:

- 1) The first and more substantial part describes the diplomatic activities of the Holy See;
- 2) The second concerns the activities of other structures of the Holy See and of the Vatican State;³

¹ FRANCIS, *Homily*, 14 March 2013.

² FRANCIS, *Homily*, 23 May 2013.

³ THE ROMAN CURIA

In exercising supreme, full, and immediate power in the universal Church, the Roman pontiff makes use of the departments of the Roman Curia which, therefore, perform their duties in his name and with his authority for the good of the churches and in the service of the sacred pastors. One of the departments, the Secretariat of State, is – among other functions – responsible for the Holy See’s diplomatic relations with States, including the establishment of Concordats or similar agreements, and for the Holy See’s presence in international organizations and conferences.

VATICAN CITY STATE

- 3) The third part will focus on the role of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace;
- 4) The forth and conclusive part will identify three important tracks for reflection and action from the legacy of Benedict XVI.

I will focus on the activities and statements made under the Pontificate of Benedict XVI. With your kind comprehension, you easily understand that the Pontificate of Pope Francis is too “fresh” and, on the other hand, I really have no time to present the stewardship of Creation in the Second Vatican Council, or under the Pontificate of Paul VI and, even less, in John Paul II’s one.⁴

The actual Vatican City State was founded following the signing of the Lateran Pacts between the Holy See and Italy (1929). Its nature as a sovereign State distinct from the Holy See is universally recognized under international law.

The Catholic Church carries out its mission of announcing the truth of the Gospel for the salvation of all humanity and in the service of peace and justice in favour of all peoples, both through the various specific and local Churches spread throughout the world, as well as through its central government. This is made up of the Pope and the Departments that assist him in carrying out his responsibilities towards the universal Church (identified as the Apostolic See or Holy See). The Pope lives in Vatican City where several of the aforementioned Departments are to be found. Vatican City State has the singular characteristic of being an instrument of the independence of the Holy See, and of the Catholic Church, from any earthly power. In a way, it is a sign of the Church’s supernatural character insofar as the structures of Vatican City are reduced to the minimum necessary to guarantee its functions.

⁴ I recommend: PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg, An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment 1972-2002*, Vatican City 2002.

1) Diplomatic Activities of the Holy See

The Holy See (HS) is present in the life of several International Organizations (IO), mainly through its accredited diplomats. Some IO such as the United Nations have a global range, others are regional, as European ones. The official status of the HS in each IO is different: it officiates as guest, permanent guest, observer, member, founding member. The influence and the activities of the HS, consequently, also vary considerably in each context, according to its status but also to personnel relations or habits.

The Vatican website, in the part of the Secretariat of State,⁵ offers an exhaustive view of the numerous diplomatic activities of the Holy See. I will present and comment only a few, having as reference point the following two questions: which are the main IO where HS strives for safeguarding Creation? How do the HS delegations work in those contexts?

It must be recalled that the HS, for geographical reasons but certainly mainly for affinity of interests, is very close to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations). Each year, in October, on

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http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/index.htm

the occasion of the World Food Day, the Pope sends a Message to FAO Director General. Every two years the participants of the Conference of the FAO (= governing body) usually have an audience with the Pontiff. A liaison team from the HS follows the activities of FAO, IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development) and WFP (World Food Programme), where the HS has the status of observer. Under Pope Benedict XVI, the HS main contribution was to encourage the International Community to address the global challenge of food (in) security, recommending not to focus only on technical or short-term problems. Indeed, famine is not entirely due to geographical and climatic situations, to conflicts or to harvest scarcity. It is also caused by human selfishness, which is expressed by gaps in social organization, by rigidity in economic structures all too often oriented solely for profit, and even by practices against human life and ideological systems that reduce the person, deprived of his fundamental dignity, to being a mere instrument. A true world development, organized and integral, must be promoted and reached. It requires an objective knowledge of human situations, the identification of the real causes of poverty and effective responses, while respecting biodiversity and the whole Creation. In fact, the human being must not rashly compromise the natural balance, a result of the order of

creation, but on the contrary must take care to pass on to future generations an earth able to feed them.⁶

Apart from food security, another important subject is the use of natural resources, its sustainability and its priorities: «The order of creation demands that priority be given to those human activities that do not cause irreversible damage to nature, but which instead are woven into the social, cultural and religious fabric of the different communities. In this way, a sober balance is achieved between consumption and the sustainability of resources».⁷

Two other contributions - among several examples - from Benedict XVI shall be quoted: his *Message to the Director General of FAO on the occasion of the World Water Day 2007*, which defends this vital element often mentioned by the HS; and his *Message for the World Day of Peace of 2010*, which combines Peace and Creation.

In 2012, during a meeting of the of the Council of Ministers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE, where the HS has a member status), the HS

⁶ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Food Day 2005*, 12 October 2005.

⁷ ID., *Message for the World Food Day 2006*, 16 October 2006.

representative, while speaking about environment, insisted on the importance of a good governance that takes «into account the common good».⁸

In 2008, the Holy See acceded to the Vienna Convention on the Protection of the Ozone Layer and the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. On this occasion, the HS encouraged the entire International Community to be resolute in promoting authentic cooperation. Such cooperation can achieve important outcomes, which make it simultaneously possible to safeguard creation, to promote integral human development and to care for the common good, in a spirit of responsible solidarity and with profound positive repercussions for present and future generations. Moreover, the HS gave its moral support to the commitment of States to the correct and effective implementation of the Treaties in question.⁹

In 2012, during a meeting of States adhering to the Montreal Protocol, the representative of the HS raised the following question: «How can we manage to arrive at a clear and firm

⁸ HOLY SEE, *Statement at the 19th meeting of the Council of Ministers of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, Dublin, 6-7 December 2012, § 4.

⁹ Cf. HOLY SEE, *Declaration attached to the instrument of accession to the Vienna Convention and the Montreal Protocol*, 2008.

political will necessary to reach agreement on further measures that would efficiently address the urgent need for enhanced protection of creation as a whole?». By doing it, he underlined that political will is the main problem. He also added that «protection of creation in all its aspects is a duty of solidarity toward future generations».¹⁰

Still in 2012, the HS intervened at the UN General Assembly during a session dedicated to *Adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations by peaceful means*. The Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See included safeguarding the environment as one of the more crucial challenges, and asked why we are still lacking a global governance in this sector.¹¹

A similar comment can be found in another of his speeches, delivered during a General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (of which the HS is a founding member). The Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See said that the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty represents «a great leap forward for the future of humanity, as well as for the protection of

the earth and environment entrusted to our care by the Creator».¹²

The HS participated also in the preparatory process that culminated in the well-known “Rio+20 Conference”, June 2012. This required the preparation of a position paper as an official input from the HS to the Conference. This also required, during the negotiation phase, the study of each draft of the final declaration of the Conference, a text entitled *The Future we Want*. Besides such preparation work, the HS participated in the sessions of the Conference and at a side-event. In view of this Conference, the HS especially insisted on the safeguard of the human person and on the fundamental values of responsibility and solidarity. Additionally, it explained that the “green economy” (a work-on-progress-concept) must absolutely be rooted in principles consistent with human dignity. It’s worth quoting the Intervention of the Brazilian Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer who was the Special Envoy of Pope Benedict XVI as well as the Head of the HS Delegation: «The ongoing economic and financial crisis has risked undermining the great progress made in recent decades in technological and scientific development. Engaging such problems honestly and

¹⁰ HOLY SEE, *Intervention at the High Level of the 24th Meeting of the Parties to the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer*, Geneva, 15 November 2012.

¹¹ ID., *Statement at the 67th Ordinary Session of the UN General Assembly*, New York, 1 October 2012.

¹² ID., *Statement to the 56th General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency*, Vienna, 17 September 2012, § 4.

courageously will challenge the international community to a renewed and deepened reflection on the meaning of the economy and its purposes, as well as a renewal of models of development which will not allow the ‘why’ of development to be overwhelmed by the urgent ‘how’ of technological solutions. This examination must include not merely the economic or ecological state of health of the planet, but must also require taking stock of the moral and cultural crisis, the symptoms of which are now evident in all parts of the world. This is undoubtedly a complex challenge to confront, but the Holy See stresses the importance of moving from a merely technological model of development to an integral human model which takes as its point of departure the dignity and worth of each and every person. Each individual member of society is called to adopt a vocational attitude which freely assumes responsibility, in genuine solidarity with one another and all of creation».¹³

The HS also wants to protect Creation from “privatization” for business purposes through patents. As an example, we can quote a 2010 statement from the HS to the World Trade Organization (the HS has an Observer status). The HS representative encouraged to «not

ignore the major economic, environmental, and ethical concerns about the patenting of life, since such action would exert a negative impact on consumer rights, biodiversity conservation, environmental protection, indigenous rights, scientific and academic freedom, and, ultimately, the economic development of many developing countries».¹⁴

Finally, it must be pointed out – even if without getting into details – the HS has an Observer status to the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and that it attends the various activities connected to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Those few hints are sufficient in order to provide an overview of the activities undertaken by the HS in recent years through its diplomatic network. I summarize the main points: governance, solidarity, right-based approach, common good and political will.

¹³ ID., *Intervention to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development*, Rio de Janeiro, 22 June 2012.

¹⁴ ID., *Statement at the World Trade Organization Council on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights*, Geneva, 8 June 2010, n. 5.

2) Other activities of the Holy See

For a more complete overview, we must have a look also to those activities not exactly belonging to the diplomatic area.

Creation, understood as an ecosystem that can be analyzed, has been studied several times by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (PAS). The PAS organizes in-depth thematic seminars, which usually lead to publications on issues like: water (2005), glaciers (2011), transgenic plants (2010) climate change and biodiversity (2010). The publications usually include the minutes of each seminar, which is quite interesting as they represent the contributions of scientist from different disciplines and different nations.

The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences works in a similar way, but its publications only marginally concern the environment or ecology; for example in its studies on globalization.

We should not forget that that Creation includes us... humans too! In this regard, the activities of the Pontifical Academy of Life, need to be mentioned. It studies issues like: embryos (2006), right to life (2007), genetics or eugenics (2009). Recently, Pope Francis, strongly insisted on those issues: He stipulated “cultivating and guarding” doesn't

include only the relationship between humans and the environment, but they also concern human relationships.” «The Popes have spoken of *human ecology* as closely linked to *environmental ecology*. We are experiencing a moment of crisis; we see it in the environment, but mostly we see it in man. The human being is at stake: here is the urgency of human ecology! And the danger is serious because the cause of the problem is not superficial, but profound: it's not just a matter of economics, but of ethics and anthropology. The Church has stressed this several times; and many say: yes, that is right, it's true ... but the system continues as before, because what dominates are the dynamics of an economy and a lack of financial ethics. So men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: this is “scrap culture”, the culture of the disposable. [...] So people are discarded, as if they were trash. This “scrap culture” is becoming a common mentality, infecting everyone. Human life, the person are no longer perceived as the primary value to respect and protect, especially if they are poor or disabled, if they are no longer needed – like the unborn child – or are no longer of use – like the elderly person».¹⁵

Finally, we may add that the Vatican State installed within his borders two solar devices.

¹⁵ FRANCIS, *General Audience*, 5 June 2013.

In 2008, the roof of the *Paul VI audience hall* was covered with photovoltaic panels. The following year, in another area of the State a plant was installed for conversion of solar energy in heat/cooling energy.¹⁶

3) Activities of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace

The contribution of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace¹⁷ (PCJP) to the safeguard of the environment is multiform.

On one hand, there is an activity of analysis and reflection - and sometime of official representation -, mainly in collaboration with the Secretariat of State: for example in order to provide opinions while preparing the already mentioned UN Conference Rio+20 or during the negotiations. In 2012, an official of the PCJP was asked to reinforce the HS mission to UNESCO on occasion of the preparation of the 6th World Water Forum. This Forum took place short after, in Marseille, France, and the Delegation of the HS to the Forum was composed of three members of the PCJP staff.

On the other hand, there is a constant activity, demanding but enriching, of monitoring the

main environmental issues related with justice and peace. In the last years, for instance, the PCJP worked on water, energy, land management and food security. In a near future we will almost certainly work also on issues concerning extractive industries and mining corporations.

Those activities of the Dicastery are “for” and “with” the universal Church. In fact (apart from the cooperation with other structures based in the Vatican) there is a constant contact, let it be formal or informal, with missionaries, bishops, NGOs, groups of engaged laypersons, religious congregations, catholic universities or training centers, representatives from Caritas or from other charity organizations, Justice and Peace national commissions,... They all are, somehow, eyes of the Council in the field. They experience deforestation, pollution, agricultural evolutions, rural poverty,...

The staff of the Dicastery is supported by various experts from all over the world, including official members and consultants. It analyzes the numerous questions on the agenda, always working in the light of the Gospel and of the Social Teaching of the Church. Obviously the results of this work – which is somehow done at a universal level –

¹⁶ Cf. FRANCESCO VALIANTE, *La scatola verde del Vaticano* in «L'Osservatore Romano», 8 December 2010, p. 8.

¹⁷ <http://www.justpax.va/>

should be, later, adapted and realized in each context, at national or continental level.

I conclude this part on the PCJP with a comment on the Social Teaching of the Church (STC). The Dicastery works a lot “on” and “thanks to” the STC, which provides precious principles for the safeguard of the Creation and its resources. Among those principles: common good; universal destination of goods / created things; subsidiarity; justice¹⁸. Thanks to the ethical platform given by the above-mentioned principles, we can shape development cooperation without falling into mercantilism or dependency, we can design solutions that really benefit and empower the poorest and weakest; we can understand which role should have the politic community and the international community in order to deal with the environmental challenges and favor an authentic, human, integral development.

4) Conclusions: the legacy of Benedict XVI

It is important that the Catholics are aware of the activities that have been mentioned in this paper, even if superficially. They must also understand that the HS - according to procedures, languages and agendas specific to each context - is always by some means working to promote the Gospel. This is why a

¹⁸ Cf. PCJP, *Compendium of the Social teaching of the Church*, Vatican City 2004, § 164-188, 203, 206.

strong synergy is needed: with think tanks, advocacy groups, civil society mechanisms, medias, educative structures and, finally, each Catholic.

Now, I would like to underscore three issues for reflection and action from the Magisterium of Benedict XVI.

Energy, a question deeply connected to justice and peace.¹⁹ Serious questions are waiting for effective responses and solutions. For instance: how can we use energy in solidarity and in a more durable way? With which energy sources, which markets, which politics? How can we eliminate or at least share equitably the numerous negative outputs from the production or consumption of energy? How can we equitably share the benefits from energy commerce? How can we grant access to energy to everyone, and with which priorities?

International cooperation concerning Creation.²⁰ International cooperation, finance, environmental issues and development ones are deeply woven. How and with which criteria can we manage investments, discourage harmful subsidies,

¹⁹ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, nn. 49, 50; ID., *Message for the World Day of Peace 2010*, 1 January 2010, § 9.

²⁰ Cf ID., *Caritas in veritate*, § 57, 58, 67.

and oppose hoarding of resources? Answer those challenges becomes rapidly a vital factor, if we speak about food, water, land, seeds. How can we foster development in each country, without maintaining dependency and underdevelopment? This requires radical and systemic changes. It is not a problem of context... of crisis... the system must be changed. This include adopting an ethics which is not “profit for profit”, neither exploitation of human person; and having institutions and economic structures more just both at national and international level. This requires governance.

Human ecology.²¹ Nowadays several things concerning the human person that were obvious to the common sense some decades ago must be explained and demonstrated. Time will not permit me to go into details but, especially for now, safeguarding the Creation, clearly, includes the human person, and I mean every human person.

Energy, internal cooperation and human ecology... These are the three points I would like us to reflect upon. How can we... among us, in Creatio, in Rio, in the Church,... deal with such important issues? Remember that:

²¹ Cf ID., *Message for the World Day of Peace 2007*, 1 January 2007, § 8-11; ID., *Address to the Reichstag*, Berlin, 22 September 2011; ID., *Message for the World Day of Peace 2010*, 1 January 2010, § 11-12.

we cannot dispense ourselves from the Gospel and of Catholic values when we are dealing with the environment or, better, with the Creation.