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Addresses

Creatio Conference: Faith & Environment: Questions & Challenges [Opening Remarks]

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If you've been following his pontificate, you may have noticed that Benedict XVI is developing the most detailed corpus of official Catholic thought on the environment in Church history.

He's included the issue in key events, such as World Youth Day in Australia last summer. He dedicates a full chapter to the environment in his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*. And the theme he chose for the 43rd World Day of Peace, which we'll celebrate on January 1, 2010, is "If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation." This means that sometime soon, the Pope will deliver an official writing totally focused on our responsibility for the created world.

But a Catholic concern for the environment is not at all new.

Today's growing global concern for the environment has helped the Church better articulate her teachings on this matter. The recent writings of Pope Benedict embody that. But since the beginning of Christianity, the Church has *always* believed that Jesus Christ redeemed all creation by his sacrifice. Human reverence for God's creation is a natural consequence of Christ's call to all human beings to be reconciled with God and with their fellow human beings.

The Christian belief that human sin wounds and enslaves creation, and that reconciliation with God redeems and liberates it, goes back to St. Paul. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul wrote: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8: 22-23).

This belief passed from generation to generation of Christians and moved the hearts of many holy men and women over the centuries. An obvious example is the founder of my own religious order, St. Francis of Assisi.

St. Francis, as I'm sure you know, is seen by some as "the first environmentalist." Others view him as a sort of "hippie" of the Middle Ages or a peaceful revolutionary in the vein of the well intentioned but excessively romantic movie, *Brother Son and Sister Moon*.

As a Capuchin Franciscan, I find these caricatures frustrating because they diminish the true St. Francis. Nothing Francis did or believed can be understood outside the context of the Christian Gospel. His Christian faith gave him a profound sense of reality. In fact, Francis was the exact opposite of a naive dreamer. His grasp of the poetry and beauty in God's creation came from the same Christian sources that led him to a deeply practical -- and unsentimental -- understanding of human sin, suffering and conflict. The real St. Francis was neither soft nor effeminized, and if he were alive today, his comments about some forms of modern environmentalism might be quite unpleasant.

Only from this Christian perspective can we fully understand the kind of realism that lies beneath the great poetic prayer which Francis wrote in A.D. 1225, a year before his death, *The Canticle of the Creatures*.

It's a prayer worth revisiting. It goes like this:

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,

*Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor and all blessing.
 To you alone, Most High, do they belong,
 and no human is worthy to mention Your name.
 Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
 especially Sir Brother Sun,
 who is the day and through whom You give us light.
 And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
 and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars;
 in heaven you formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind and through the air,
 cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,
 through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 through whom You light the night;
 and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth,
 who sustains and governs us,
 and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for Your love
 and bear infirmity and tribulation.
 Blessed are those who endure in peace,
 for by You Most High, they will be crowned.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
 from whom no one living can escape.
 Woe to those who die in mortal sin!
 Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
 for the second death shall do them no harm.
 Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,
 and serve Him with great humility.*

On a quick reading, this prayer might sound like many other nice reflections on nature. But let's look at it more closely.

First, the prayer acknowledges that the beauty of nature reflects the greatness of God, and how nature can lead the human heart not only to see, but to *praise* God and his works, and to revere God's creation. In this context, the human stewardship of creation becomes more than just a "duty." It becomes an act of reconciliation; an act of love.

Second, the prayer rejects all false ideas which oppose human beings to nature. What I mean is this. I suspect that some of today's bitter debates about the environment find their root in the philosophical tension between those who believe that human beings are separate from and opposed to nature, and those who say that humans are *merely* "nature" and nothing more.

Many of the modern technological developments that have damaged the environment flow from a sort of unconscious but powerful presupposition that civilization is a "cocoon" aimed at shielding humans from nature: We build cities, comfortable homes, cars, airplanes, computers and machines of all sorts to "protect" us from nature, to *defeat* or *conquer* nature. Certainly, today's intense cult of technology has a strong "anti-nature" bias, again, mostly unconscious. It works on the assumption that nature, including human nature, is somehow inadequate and needs to be fixed. Of course, Christians agree that human nature is broken. So is all of creation. But they can't be "fixed" through technology.

Other elements of the modern environmental movement seem grounded in the idea that we human beings are simply another part of nature. We're *not* finally unique in our dignity. In fact, we're no more and sometimes even *less* important than other parts of nature. This view argues that we humans have no right to use more than our fair share of nature's resources. Nor do we have any right or entitlement to rule nature.

Ironically, this latter approach – which comes from a *uniquely human* thirst for justice -- is self-defeating. If we're just another piece of the "nature puzzle," why should we be held more account-

able than polar bears or whales or coyotes for what happens to the environment? And why should we care about creation at all, beyond our immediate, individual self-interest?

The Christian perspective, which is embodied in the prayer of St. Francis, proclaims that we humans don't own creation, and creation has such great dignity that we even call inanimate objects our "brothers" and "sisters."

For Christians, creation is a *gift*; a treasure given to us by God. We have a duty to preserve that gift for all humans, present and future. As Pope Benedict writes in *Caritas in Veritate*, "the environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility toward the poor, toward future generations and toward humanity as a whole." (*Caritas In Veritate*, 48)

This is why, unlike the rest of creation when it faces "Sister Death," Catholics believe that we human beings will be judged by God for how we "blessed the Lord and gave Him thanks, and served Him with great humility."

We have a responsibility toward the created world because we have a higher dignity given to us by the Creator Himself. Human beings bear the unique mark of being created in the image and likeness of God, and we are God's cooperators in preserving his creation.

St. Francis lived the heart of the Christian Gospel, which preaches God's special love for the human person, without diminishing human responsibility for the rest of God's creation.

This is the common ground where faith and reason can meet in dialogue about the environment. It's where, as Pope John Paul II said in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: "the truth attained by philosophy and the truth of Revelation are neither identical nor mutually exclusive." (*Fides et Ratio*, 9) Science and religion can and should mutually enrich each other, because truth in one field can never finally be opposed to truth in another.

The suspicion of religious believers toward science in centuries past is well documented and unfortunate. It often had sad and damaging results. But what's admitted less often is the disdain science can sometimes show toward religious faith. Science needs to regain a respect for the moral and religious dimension of the environmental debate. Over the years I've noticed that many in the scientific community seem afraid of that word "moral," and especially its common association with religious faith. Some scientists seem to distrust any moral concern or criticism as an intrusion on their freedom of inquiry. In fact, some see morality as a purely subjective set of values that various groups develop and then try to impose on everyone else.

But – to put it as politely as I can – even scientists can sometimes be self-serving and intellectually evasive.

We Catholics believe that missing Mass on Sunday without a very good reason is a serious sin, because as God's sons and daughters, we owe God our love and worship. But we don't believe Sunday Mass should be turned into public law. *That* would be an imposition of our religious beliefs.

But a *moral* duty is a different, universally shared thing. The word "moral" comes from the Latin word *mores*, meaning common habits, customs or ways of doing things. It relates to principles of right and wrong behavior which are inherent in humans. These principles have been "imposed" by human nature and *reality*, not by religion. Morality is the wisdom of a society discovered through trial and error.

For example, it wasn't somebody's "religion" that first figured out that adultery is bad for society. *That* moral truth comes from primordial and unhappy human experience. Religious faith often provides the support for a society's or a person's morality; but faith and morality are not the same thing. Human beings have a *natural* sense, reinforced by experience, that things like murder, cruelty, theft, adultery, lying, greed, pride and exploiting the weak are wrong. Faith and reason can walk that common *moral* ground of the human conscience and, if we're serious about protecting the environment, they *must* walk that common ground.

Let me close with a story that makes some of my environmentalist friends uncomfortable, but it illustrates my point.

When scientists at the University of Colorado studied the trout in Boulder Creek downstream from

that city's sewer plant a few years ago, they found that, out of 123 fish, 101 were female, 12 were male, and 10 were a very strange mutation with male and female features.¹

Biologist John Woodling, one of the best known defenders of the water purity of Colorado rivers in urban areas, along with University of Colorado physiology professor David Norris and an EPA-study team, found that antibiotics, caffeine and especially the hormones from birth control pills can seriously contaminate a region's drinking water. This has unforeseen and unsettling consequences. The mutation of fish is just the tip of an iceberg.

In fact, Norris told the Boulder Daily Camera newspaper that the water effluent he found in Boulder Creek has unintended contraceptive effects in human being.²

Sheila Murphy, a hydrologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Boulder, added that David Norris' work has been important in countering some skeptics who try to attribute the transsexual fish found in the Potomac River and other American waterways to temperature changes or other influences.³

When the story of his findings hit Denver and Boulder newspapers, Norris expected a quick response from environmentalists. But he was surprised by the lack of an uproar. In fact, when asked about Boulder's genetically deformed fish and their link to contaminated drinking water, a key voice in the local environmentalist community shrugged that nobody needed to worry about curtailing the use of contraceptives to avoid polluting the water supply. "*Nobody is to blame for this*, and I don't have a solution," he said.⁴

I disagree. And it's obvious why. We human beings, our choices and our actions are responsible for every man-made mess in nature, from the chemicals in Love Canal, to the radiation at Chernobyl, to the hormones in Boulder Creek. And we *should* have a solution. A *moral* solution. That is, a response flowing from a respectful encounter of faith and reason; a response that will help us, collectively, to make the behavioral changes necessary to protect this beautiful world we share, ensuring not only its God-intended harmony, but our own well-being.

In his recent encyclical, Benedict XVI called for efforts "aimed at strengthening that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and toward whom we are journeying." (*Caritas In Veritate*, 50)

That's the challenge you face as a group during your days together. It's a task worthy of the intellectual excellence and the personal good will each of you brings to the table. I believe *Creatio* is exactly the right response to Benedict's call, and it's an urgently needed step in fostering a dialogue between faith and reason to protect creation. So I'm especially grateful to all of you for accepting the invitation to be here. And may God grant you good fellowship and a very fruitful dialogue in service to the world we all share.

1 <http://www.dailycamera.com/news/2006/dec/10/fish-sex-change-investigatedx1/?printer=1/>

2 <http://www.dailycamera.com/news/2006/dec/10/fish-sex-change-investigatedx1/?printer=1/>

3 http://www.physiciansforlife.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1350

4 Dave Georgis, Director of the Colorado Genetic Engineering Action Network, see http://www.physiciansforlife.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=1350, page 2