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COMMANDMENTS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Benedict XVI Urges Responsibility Toward Creation

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, APRIL 18, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- In the five years since he was elected Pope, Benedict XVI has repeatedly spoken out on issues concerning ecology. As a result some have taken to calling him the "Green Pope," but such a label does not do justice to his statements.

A useful guide to what the current Pontiff has said on creation and our responsibility toward it came in a book published last year by journalist Woodeene Koenig-Bricker. In "Ten Commandments for the Environment: Pope Benedict XVI Speaks Out for Creation and Justice," (Ave Maria Press), she collects the Pope's comments, and intersperses it with her own personal opinions on the environment.

The phrase "Ten Commandments for the Environment" is not Benedict XVI's, but was the title of an [address given in 2005](#) by then Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. [Archbishop Giampaolo Crepaldi is currently the bishop of Trieste, Italy.]

The primary message of these commandments is that we must be responsible stewards of God's creation, and this corresponds to what the Pontiff has subsequently said, Koenig-Bricker commented.

"Today, we all see that man can destroy the foundations of his existence, his earth, hence, that we can no longer simply do what we like or what seems useful and promising at the time with this earth of ours, with the reality entrusted to us," the Pope said July 24, 2007, when answering questions from the priests of the northern Italian dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso.

This care for creation is founded on a conviction that goes a lot deeper than just a concern for the ecology. Benedict XVI made this clear on answering a question during his summer holidays the following year. At his meeting with the clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone on Aug. 6, 2008, he stated that there is an "indissoluble bond" between creation and redemption.

Subdue the earth

"The Redeemer is the Creator and if we do not proclaim God in his full grandeur -- as Creator and as Redeemer -- we also diminish the value of the Redemption," the Holy Father affirmed after mentioning that unfortunately in preceding decades the doctrine of creation had almost disappeared from theology.

Christians have been accused, Benedict XVI observed, of being responsible for the destruction of creation because of the words in Genesis, "subdue the earth."

This charge is false he argued, as if we see the earth as God's creation: "the task of 'subduing' it was never intended as an order to enslave it but rather as the task of being guardians of creation and developing its gifts; of actively collaborating in God's work ourselves, in the evolution that he ordered in the world so that the gifts of Creation might be appreciated rather than trampled upon and destroyed."

This linkage between the natural and supernatural, between faith in God and respect for creation was something Benedict XVI returned to in his interview with journalists on the plane trip to Sydney, Australia, on July 12, 2008.

"We need the gift of the Earth, the gift of water, we need the Creator; the Creator reappears in his creation. And so we also come to understand that we cannot be really happy, cannot be really promoting justice for all the world, without a criterion at work in our own ideas, without a God who is just, and gives us the light, and gives us life," he said.

The role of the Redeemer was mentioned by the Pope in his Midnight Mass homily of 2007. Christ, he said, "came to restore beauty and dignity to creation, to the universe: This is what began at Christmas and makes the angels rejoice."

Christmas is a feast of restored creation, the Earth is made new and we celebrate that heaven and earth, and man and God are united, he commented.

God's gift

Just after the publication of Koenig-Bricker's book came the Pope's encyclical "Charity in Truth." A few paragraphs in the encyclical were dedicated to the environment and among other points the Pontiff warned of viewing nature from a purely materialistic perspective. Human salvation cannot come from nature alone, he pointed out.

We have a legitimate stewardship over nature, Benedict XVI affirmed, which involves a duty to hand over to future generations an earth that is in good condition.

This is not just a matter for science or economics, he added, but needs to be

integrated into a human ecology that includes all that shapes our existence.

"The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development," the Pope said.

There is a fundamental contraction in our mentality if, on the one hand, we insist on respect for the natural environment while, on the other hand, not respecting the right to life and to a natural death, Benedict XVI insisted.

This linkage between respect for the environment and respect for life has been a recurring theme in the Pope's statements on the ecology.

"The great and vital moral themes of peace, non-violence, justice, and respect for creation do not in themselves confer dignity on man," he told the new Irish ambassador to the Holy See on Sept. 15, 2007.

Human life has an innate dignity, he explained. "How disturbing it is that not infrequently the very social and political groups that, admirably, are most attuned to the awe of God's creation pay scant attention to the marvel of life in the womb," the Pope commented.

Ecology and peace

Earlier in the year, in his World Day of Peace Message for 2007, Benedict XVI also linked respect for the ecology and peace.

"Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a 'human' ecology, which in turn demands a 'social' ecology," he observed. "Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa," he continued.

"It becomes more and more evident that there is an inseparable link between peace with creation and peace among men. Both of these presuppose peace with God," the Pope concluded.

This relationship between ecology and peace returned as the central theme of the World Day of Peace Message in 2010.

The environment is God's gift to all peoples he said and neither nature nor humans should be seen as mere products, the Pope affirmed. He urged a greater solidarity among nations in dealing with ecological problems and to examine our lifestyle and models of consumption and productions.

Once more he warned against a pantheism or neo-paganism in which our salvation is seen as being achieved in the natural world alone. Benedict XVI stated that the Church has grave misgivings about an ecocentric or biocentric vision of the environment. The danger with these approaches is that they do not see any difference between the human person and other living creatures.

"In the name of a supposedly egalitarian vision of the 'dignity' of all living creatures, such notions end up abolishing the distinctiveness and superior role of human beings," he adverted.

In concluding the message, Benedict XVI observed that Christians contemplate the cosmos and its marvels in the light of the creative work of the Father and the redemptive work of Christ. Care for the environment, respect for human values and life, and solidarity among all are thus linked to our faith in God, creator and redeemer. A complex vision of the natural and supernatural that goes far beyond the idea of simply being green.

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