



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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God entrusted the earth to our stewardship

1. The Apostle Paul states that "our homeland is in heaven" (*Phil* 3: 20), but he does not conclude that we can passively wait for our entry into this homeland; rather he urges us to be actively involved. "Let us not grow weary in well-doing", he writes, "for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (*Gal* 6: 9-10).

Biblical revelation and the best philosophical wisdom agree in stressing that, on the one hand, humanity strives for the infinite and eternity but, on the other, it is firmly planted on earth, within the coordinates of time and space. There is a transcendent goal to be reached, but along a path that unfolds on earth and in history. The words of Genesis are illuminating: the human creature is tied to the dust of the earth, but at the same time he has a "breath" that unites him directly to God (cf. *Gn* 2: 7).

2. Genesis also says that when man came forth from God's hands, he was put "in the garden of Eden, to cultivate it and care for it" (2: 15). The two verbs in the original Hebrew text are used elsewhere to indicate "serving" God and "observing" his word, that is, Israel's commitment to the covenant with the Lord. This analogy seems to suggest that a primary covenant joins the Creator to Adam and to every human creature, a covenant that is fulfilled in the duty to fill the earth, subduing it and having dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, and every other living thing that moves upon the earth (cf. *Gn* 1: 28; *Ps* 8: 7-9).

Unfortunately, man often carries out this mission assigned to him by God not as a wise artisan but

as an overbearing tyrant. In the end, he finds himself in a devastated and hostile world, in a shattered and divided society, as Genesis further teaches us in the great fresco of the third chapter, which describes the breaking of the harmony between man and his fellow human beings, the earth and the Creator himself. This is the result of original sin, that is, of the rebellion which occurred at the very beginning of the plan entrusted to humanity by God.

3. Therefore, with the grace of Christ the Redeemer we must once again make our own the plan of peace and development, of justice and solidarity, of the transformation and wise use of earthly and temporal realities foreshadowed in the first pages of the Bible. We must continue humanity's great adventure in the field of science and technology, discovering nature's secrets. We must develop - through the economy, trade and social life - well-being, knowledge and victory over poverty and over every degradation of human dignity.

In a certain sense, God has delegated his creative work to man, so that it will continue both in the extraordinary feats of science and technology and in the daily commitment of workers, scholars and those who, with their minds and hands, seek to "cultivate and care for" the earth and to increase solidarity among men and women. God is not absent from his creation, but has "crowned man with glory and honour", making him so to speak his representative, through his autonomy and freedom, in the world and in history (cf. *Ps* 8: 6-7).

4. As the Psalmist says, in the morning "man goes forth to his work and to his labour until the evening" (*Ps* 104: 23). In his parables Christ also refers to this work of man and woman in fields and at sea, in homes and at meetings, in law courts and in the market place. He uses it to illustrate symbolically the mystery of the kingdom of God and of its gradual realization, although he knows that this work is often frustrated by evil and sin, by selfishness and injustice. The mysterious presence of the kingdom in history sustains and enlivens the Christian's commitment to his earthly tasks.

Involved in this work and in this struggle, Christians are called to cooperate with the Creator to build on earth a "home for man" in greater conformity with his dignity and the divine plan, a home in which "mercy and faithfulness shall meet, justice and peace shall embrace" (*Ps* 85: 11).

5. In this light, I would once again like to offer for your meditation the passages in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* (cf. chapters III and IV) which the Second Vatican Council devoted to "man's activity in the universe" and to "the role of the Church in the modern world". "To believers", the Council teaches, "one thing is certain: individual and collective activity, that monumental effort of man through the centuries to improve the circumstances of the world, presents no problem: considered in itself, it corresponds to the plan of God" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 34).

The complexity of modern society makes ever more arduous the commitment to animate the

political, cultural, economic and technological structures, which are often soulless. In this difficult but promising horizon, the Church is called to recognize the autonomy of earthly realities (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 36), and also effectively to proclaim "the priority of ethics over techniques, the primacy of the person over things, the superiority of the spirit over matter" (Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, 30 December 1988, n. 44). Only in this way will Paul's prediction be fulfilled: "Creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... who subjected it in hope; because creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8: 19-21).

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I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Northern Ireland and the United States of America. I pray that the Advent Season will be a time of particular grace for you, as you prepare in faith, hope and charity for the celebration of the Two Thousandth Anniversary of the Saviour's birth. Entrusting you and your families to the protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, I invoke upon you abundant divine blessings.

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