

Nature, Man and God

Vatican Seminar Debates Climate Issues

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ROME, MAY 6, 2007 .- The worlds of science and faith had a chance to meet during a seminar held in the Vatican on the subject of climate change. On April 26-27 the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace hosted a gathering of scientists, politicians, theologians and bishops on the theme "Climate Change and Development."

Cardinal Renato Martino, the council's president, opened the proceedings by reading a telegram from Benedict XVI, signed by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican secretary of state. The Pontiff thanked the participants for coming together to discuss climate change. The short message then went on to mention the importance of the principle of social doctrine of the universal destiny of goods, and the need to adopt a lifestyle and way of producing and consuming that respects creation and sustainable development.

In his opening address Cardinal Martino explained that the purpose of the seminar was above all a listening exercise to gather information in order to help the Church in formulating an ethical and pastoral response to the matter of climate change.

In reference to some of the theological issues involved, Cardinal Martino commented that the first chapters of the Bible demonstrate that the reality created by God exists for the use of mankind. "The dominion of man over creation, nevertheless, does not have to be a despotic dominion and domination; on the contrary, he has to 'cultivate and take care of' the goods created by God," he observed.

The scientific angle

The first day was dedicated to the scientific aspects of climate. Laurent Stefanini, French ambassador for the environment, spoke of the historical background of climate change. He also gave a run-down of some of the meetings held in recent years on the issue.

The British environment minister, David Miliband, stressed the urgency of acting on climate change. He also augured that the Vatican would lend its weight to the campaign on issue, just as it has been active in matters related to economic development for poorer nations.

An overview of the data and projections regarding climate was given by Stefan Rahmstorf, from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany. He defended the accuracy of the reports published by the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Some of the other speakers questioned the validity of these reports, or whether climate change will be disastrous. Italian physicist and president of the World Federation of Scientists, Antonino Zichichi, drew attention to problems with the mathematical models

used to predict climate change.

“There is a need to do more work, with a lot more rigor, to better the models being used,” he argued in a 60-page written paper that accompanied his speech to the seminar.

The consequences of higher carbon dioxide levels was addressed by Craig Idso, head of the Center for the Study of Carbon Dioxide and Global Change, based in Arizona, United States.

He argued that increased carbon dioxide would stimulate plant life, both increasing agricultural productivity and strengthening plants to resist the adverse consequences of higher temperatures.

The political aspects of the debate were also examined. Among the speakers on this issue was Argentina’s ambassador for international environmental issues, Raúl Estrada Oyuela. Opening his remarks Estrada was critical of some of the views expressed during the opportunities for discussion in the seminar that had called for limiting economic growth to avoid ecological damage. He also defended the international agreements on climate matters and called on richer nations to take the brunt of the costs in addressing the problem.

Theology and ecology

The second day of the seminar saw a number of addresses on the theological and pastoral aspects of climate and ecology. E. Calvin Beisner, of the Interfaith Stewardship Alliance, located in Virginia, United States, offered an interpretation of some Biblical texts. Using a more literal exegetical method, that did not meet with a favorable reaction among many of the seminar’s participants, he called for greater confidence in God’s providence regarding possible ecological problems.

Auxiliary Bishop Bernd Uhl of Freiburg, Germany, spoke about Catholic social teaching as related to climate issues. One of the points he raised was the need to talk of creation, rather than environment. Creation, he continued, embodies value and reminds us of God. “Without a belief in God’s creation, there is a danger that nature or the earth will be made into a god,” he warned.

Elias Crisostomo Abramides, head of the climate change program for the World Council of Churches, urged greater responsibility in caring for creation. He was also critical of what he termed the “destructive over-consumption” in developed nations.

Bishop Christopher Toohey of Wilcannia-Forbes in New South Wales, Australia, and in charge of ecological matters for the Australian episcopal conference, addressed some of the pastoral issues.

In orienting people over ecological questions it is important to keep in mind, Bishop Toohey, explained, that we move people’s hearts, not just their minds. We need to remind all of the wonder and beauty of God’s creation. Moreover, action in the area of climate must be accompanied by a deep contemplation and awareness of the divine presence and richness of the Church’s teachings.

Our vocation as stewards of creation is not just something accidental, but stems “from the reality of God and the truth about ourselves,” Bishop Toohey stated. He also urged the seminar’s participants to look upon the concern over environmental issues as an opportunity

to evangelize.

A complex discussion

Prefacing his remarks with the qualification that he was not expressing an official position by the Church or the pontifical council he heads, in his concluding address Cardinal Martino noted that the term most used during the proceedings was “complex.” In reference to disagreements among some of the participants, he thanked all for their contributions, that in their variety allowed a lively debate over the issues.

Cardinal Martino stated that: “Nature is for man, and man is for God.” Therefore, we must avoid both the error of making nature an absolute, and also the mistake of reducing it to a mere instrument.

Developing this idea Cardinal Martino argued that the human person has an “unarguable superiority” over creation and, by virtue of possessing an immortal soul, cannot be put on the same level as other living beings. Likewise, it is a mistake to consider the human presence as disturbing the natural ecological equilibrium.

At the same time we have the responsibility of conserving and developing nature within the framework of the principle of the universal destiny of goods, and of a concern for the welfare of the poor.

Cardinal Martino also warned of the danger of “modern forms of idolatry of nature that lose sight of man.” Referring to debates in past years over demographic concerns he noted the danger of policies that seek to limit population, with a view to saving the environment, by using abortion and sterilization.

The Church has a “realistic” view of matters, the cardinal continued, with confidence in the human capacity to find solutions to problems — a capacity that proves wrong the frequent forecasts of catastrophe.

Concluding his address, Cardinal Martino pointed out that the issue of ecology is above all an ethical one. Pope John Paul II, he noted, used the term “human ecology,” meaning that we must respect nature not only in natural ways, but also by means of a upright moral life. At its roots the ecological problem is both anthropological and theological.

The way we relate to nature in fact depends on how we relate to other persons, and how we relate to God. Useful orientations to guide Christians in a complex debate.

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