

**MOVING BEYOND NORMAL:
A ROMAN CATHOLIC
PERSPECTIVE ON THE
ECOLOGICAL CRISIS**

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PART I – THE NEED FOR A NEW START

INTRODUCTION – UNDER A SPELL

In 1975 E. F. Schumacher was commenting on the naïve optimism of those who believed that Britain would emerge from the economic crisis it had been experiencing and return to normal by means of wage restraints and cuts in government spending. He was pointing out that the economic thinking behind that idea of *normal* would only worsen the already emerging “crisis of resources, the ecological crisis and the social crisis.” Assumptions about what constitutes *normal* were the problem, and they were not being addressed. This is how he put it:

It is the end of an era. As Barbara Ward put it very simply a year or so ago: “The party is over.”

What sort of a party was it? It was a party mainly for a small minority of countries and for a small... minority within those countries... We allowed ourselves to be entertained by three illusions:

First, there was the illusion of an inexhaustible supply of cheap fuels and raw materials.

Second, there was the illusion of an almost equally inexhaustible supply of workers willing to do boring, repetitive, soul-destroying work for very modest rewards.

Third, there was the illusion that Science and Technology would soon, very soon, make everybody so rich that no problems remained except what on earth to do with all our leisure and wealth.

These illusionary entertainers, who made the party what it was, all three of them, have left, have completely vanished: they had cast a spell over us, had taken us on a trip. Every day now it seems more incredible that we were taken in by them and believed what they told us. We are waking up – and see a great deal of debris around us – but the spell is still there in a subtle kind of way: most of what we say and do is still based on the implicit assumption that the three entertainers will soon return and the party will be resumed.

In fact, we all *know* that the three great entertainers will *not* return; that the party is over.¹

¹ This quote is from an address by Schumacher given at the AGM of the Catholic Institute for International Relations, 13 June 1975. It was published as “The Party is over,” in *Resurgence* 6/4 (Sept-Oct 1975), and republished in *This I Believe and Other Essays* (Dartington Totnes: Green Books, 1997), 21–24. The quote is on pp. 21–22 of *This I Believe*.

Not much has changed over thirty years. It seems we just do not learn. The banking crisis of more recent times is evidence of that. Attempts were made to repair the existing systems in order to return to business as usual. But, “business as usual” was the problem!

In our own country the spell of the entertainers still lingers. Some economic planners tend to think of social impacts and ecological impacts as a kind of collateral damage, to be redressed afterwards – from the proceeds of an economy based on purely economic principles and efficiency. This begs the question: is it good economics if it doesn’t try to *prevent* negative social and ecological impacts? This paper is largely about the need for *integrated* social, economic and ecological planning.

A MORAL/SPIRITUAL CRISIS

I am under no illusion about the difficulties, the main one being that what has not gone away is the underlying spiritual/moral crisis, at the root of which is greed. It is compounded by self-deception and the deception of others. Have you heard people in the oil industry talking about reasons for price-hikes, or people in the liquor and tobacco industries talking about “self-regulation?” In biblical categories what we are dealing with is “self-indulgence” and “hardness of heart.” That is why Pope Paul VI, also in 1975, emphasised that “there is no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons.”² That is where a new start begins.

But it doesn’t finish there: he went on to say that evangelisation involves every aspect of our lives, “both personal and social”³ with a view to transforming and making humanity itself into something new.⁴

The biblical term for “new persons” is “conversion.” It involves a *turning from* current self-centred attitudes and lifestyles. But more importantly, it involves a *turning to*; and for Christians this means deepening our relationship with Christ. In the language of Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of Constantinople,

[t]he problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change of lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ

² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 18. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html. Accessed 27 February 2013.

³ *ibid.* n. 29.

⁴ See *ibid.* n. 28.

will enable us to change the way we think and act.⁵

CONNECTIONS

John Paul II and the Patriarch were acknowledging the connectedness of the economic, the social and the ecological, and of all these with the moral and spiritual. The connections go deep and have to do with how much we respect human dignity – our own and that of others. In his 2009 Encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI claimed that “*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.*”⁶ Human life itself is part of the life of the planet. And so, it would be inconsistent, not to say, shallow and cynical, to speak of respecting the planet while not deeply respecting human life itself, at every moment from conception till natural death:

How can we separate or even set at odds, the protection of the environment and the protection of human life... since the book of nature is one and indivisible?⁷

A green brand of politics has not yet understood this. The crisis affecting the environment did not start with the environment. Not all “natural” disasters are natural. The crisis starts in human hearts. It results from the kind of economies we build. The environment cannot be isolated from our human activities.

A NEW ERA AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES

John Paul II and the Patriarch also implied that there is a way out of our crises, but it calls for a “change in the way we think and act.”⁸ I stand with those who believe – even against the odds – that we live on the threshold of new opportunities for genuinely ethical approaches. If we are at the end of one era, we are also at the beginning of another. I find reason for hope in the intuitions of younger generations, and in John Paul II’s and the Patriarch’s reminder that “it is not too late. God’s world has incredible healing powers.”⁹

5 John Paul II and Bartholomew I, *Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I*, 10 June 2002. n. p. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration_en.html. Accessed 27 February 2013.

6 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 51. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html. Accessed 27 February 2013 (italics original).

7 Benedict XVI, “Annual Address to Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See 11 January 2010,” n. p. Online: <http://visnews-en.blogspot.co.nz/2010/01/defence-of-creation-focus-of-pope.html>. Accessed 27 February 2013.

8 John Paul II and Bartholomew I, *Common Declaration*.

9 Ibid.

The ethical approaches I am suggesting presuppose five things:

1. Personal conversion, (whatever our religious affiliations);
2. The connectedness of economic, social and ecological issues;
3. The need for strategies if we expect to be effective;
4. Strategies that involve public discussion and include all who are likely to be affected by any decisions;
5. The need to build consensus within communities of interest, i.e. having regard to different levels of understanding and different motivations.

PART II - CONSENSUS-BUILDING

1. CONSENSUS AMONG THOSE WHO RECOGNISE ECONOMIC GOOD SENSE AND A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

The most basic level of consensus could be among those who can see the economic good sense of working for sustainable development. People in this group accept the economic fact that increasing production and consumption are not indefinitely sustainable, and that whether we like it or not we need to move from high energy consumption to much lower levels of energy consumption. They accept that “the party is over.”

This approach involves self-interest, but there is also a sense of social responsibility involved when it is accepted that humanity is consuming “the resources of the earth and his own life in an excessive and disordered way... [and that this ends up provoking] a rebellion on the part of nature.”¹⁰

Galvanising the consensus and the potential consensus within this group would be part of a wider strategy.

2. CONSENSUS AMONG THOSE WANTING AUTHENTIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

There is also potential for building consensus among those who realise that authentic human development cannot be one-dimensional – it involves the proper integration of many facets of human wellbeing: cultural, spiritual, social, environmental and economic. Increasingly, people see through the reductionist policies and slogans that speak of a “better future” based narrowly on economic planning and business as usual.

As Pope John Paul II put it:

10 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 37. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html. Accessed 27 February 2013.

... There are collective and qualitative needs which cannot be satisfied by market mechanisms. There are important human needs which escape its logic. There are goods which by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold.¹¹

And Pope Paul VI:

[Development]... cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well-rounded; it must foster the development of each individual man, each human group, and humanity as a whole.

If development calls for an ever-growing number of technical experts, even more necessary still is the deep thought and reflection of wise men in search of a new humanism, one which will enable our contemporaries to enjoy the higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and contemplation, and thus find themselves. This is what will guarantee man's authentic development...¹²

That has implications also for how we understand the purpose of education.

Moreover, holistic human development, though personal, is not individualistic. It involves relationality. We can only be fully alive in relationship with others. Every one of us is somehow *less* so long as we benefit by arrangements that deprive others.

The fields of trade, commerce and industry are meant to put us into relationships of respect for, and collaboration with, other people – building them up, not taking them down.

RIGHT PRIORITIES

An important feature of right relationships is respecting the priority of people over things and of needs over mere wants. The use of finance or of technology in ways that marginalise some, e.g. by creating unemployment, is an ethical issue; it is not just part of an economic equation.

Right relationships require

... economic policies which realize that the needs of the poor have priority over the wants of the rich; that the rights of workers are more important than the maximization of profits;

that the participation of marginalized groups takes precedence over the preservation of a system which excludes them.¹³

The common denominator between how we can harm one another socially and economically and how we harm the planet is plain, old-fashioned greed. Rents in Christchurch went up fifteen percent after the earthquake. The accommodation was the same, or worse. But as the need for accommodation became greater, the cost of it was put up, somewhat like a surcharge added to the cost of the commodity or service being exchanged. Can we charge people for something that is already theirs, namely their need? In the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas said “no.” Today we get around it by deeming the value of goods and services to be measured partly by “supply and demand.” We even manipulate the supply to increase the demand, and the price. I’m not sure how that is different from greed. I *am* sure that it widens the social and economic gaps between

those who can better afford and those who cannot.

Similarly, it is greed that exploits the planet's resources beyond the minimum necessary for meeting human needs, and to the maximum possible for maximising profits. And this is regarded as normal and acceptable!

The planet is not a mere quarry for one-dimensional economic purposes. It is also our human habitat, intended to meet other, no less important needs, especially the need for self-transcendence through the experience of beauty, wonder, stillness and silence, the presence of God, and communion with one another.¹⁴ The ability for self-transcendence in these ways is precisely what has been damaged and diminished by sin. Losing sight of the basic fact that creation is a gift from God, we no longer give thanks, nor see the beauty through which God attracts us. Through Christ, our relationships with God and one another are restored, and this is what changes our relationship with the planet. Ultimately, the whole issue is theological. This leads us to consider the potential for creating a further level of consensus.

THE BIBLICAL TERM FOR “NEW PERSONS” IS “CONVERSION.” IT INVOLVES A TURNING FROM CURRENT SELF-CENTRED ATTITUDES AND LIFESTYLES. BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT INVOLVES A TURNING TO; AND FOR CHRISTIANS THIS MEANS DEEPENING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST

¹¹ Ibid. n. 40.

¹² Paul VI, *Populorum Progressi*, nn. 14, 20. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html. Accessed 27 February 2013.

¹³ Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Some Ethical Reflections on the Economic Crisis, 1983.” Online: http://courses.confederationc.on.ca/ge232/Archives/Some_Ethical_Reflections_on_the_Economic_Crisis.htm. Accessed 27 February 2013.

¹⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 36.

CONSENSUS BASED ON THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

The potential for consensus at this level will be taken seriously by those of us formed by the word of God, especially but not exclusively, in the Judeo-Christian tradition. And yet it gives us common ground with people of all faiths and none who feel called to make human life more genuinely human.

The Judeo-Christian revelation gives us insights into what it means to be authentically human based on what it means for God to be God! Let me explain: In the Judeo-Christian tradition God is “Lord” and God’s freedom is sovereign. God is not dependent on, nor answerable to, any other being. Nor did God need to create. All created existence, including human existence, comes out of a choice God did not have to make. It was not owed to us. It is therefore pure gift.

Since we are, therefore, to the core of our being, gifted existence – gifts – we can only be true to ourselves by *being gifts*, i.e. being there *for others*. Christians recognise that this way of living was traced out for us by Jesus in his life and death. And it is what we commemorate and recommit ourselves to in every celebration of the Eucharist where we become one with the body given and the blood (life) poured out *for others*.

PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES

If being “for others” is how we are true to ourselves, then being “for others” needs to run through every aspect of our lives. It is not that we look to divine revelation for any kind of social or economic plan. The sciences, including economics, have an autonomy that we must respect. But that autonomy is in regard to scientific *methods*. The sciences are still subject to the requirements of authentic human well-being.

What it means to be human – gifted existence – is what enables Pope Benedict to teach that economies are not sufficiently human if they are based only on the “logic of exchange” and of strict rights. The practice of gratuitousness, of giving, of forgiving, and of compassion, need to be built into social and economic life.¹⁵

Economic thinking from within the perspectives of what it means to be human leads to the insight that building up other people is not something that is for *after* we have achieved economic success; it is something we need to do *within* the processes of economic activity. Pope Benedict sees this already

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* n. 38.

happening where companies have been formed not solely for the purpose of making profit, but with various social or humanitarian objectives as well.¹⁶ It also creates a different ethos among those who see their work in this way. It is more fully human.

This approach to human development can also be expected to impact benignly on the natural environment, because of the connection between economic activity and its impact on the environment. The planet ultimately belongs to all, including those who will come after us.

CONCLUSION

There are no short-cuts to changing harmful lifestyles. That comes out of personal conversion, and out of dialogue with one another. Dialogue and public debate are the means to building consensus.

I have proposed that we need to build or strengthen consensus within three (overlapping) “communities of interest” – (1) those who accept the economic good sense of taking a more responsible attitude towards how we treat the planet’s resources; (2) those who accept that human development cannot be reduced to any one of its aspects – it is either holistic or it is not truly human; and (3) those who draw on the Judeo-Christian tradition to know what it means to be truly human, and who discover that we can only be ourselves by being *for others*, throughout every aspect of our lives. It is a way of being that runs counter to the core problem of greed.

Galvanising these areas of consensus constitutes something of a strategy that should have both moral and political consequences.

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¹⁶ *Ibid.* n. 46.