

## Australia's Bishops and 'Climate Change'

*When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace...*

Pope John Paul II<sup>1</sup>

On 18<sup>th</sup> November 2005 Bishop Chris Toohey, member of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Committee for Justice, Development, Ecology and Peace, and 'Chair' of *Catholic Earthcare Australia*, presented what was described as 'the Bishops' position paper' at a 'climate change' conference hosted by *Catholic Earthcare Australia* in Canberra<sup>2</sup>. The paper was the work of a committee comprising Bishop Toohey, the organisation's Chief Executive Officer, Colin Brown, various scientists and other bishops.

*Sydney Morning Herald* journalist, Linda Morris, reported the following day—

*Australia's 5 million Catholics were as morally bound to combat the loss of biodiversity as they were to protect the rights of the unborn child, according to a landmark statement by the church's bishops that calls for Australia to cap greenhouse emissions.*<sup>3</sup>

The paragraph of the position paper she drew upon sets out the philosophy underlying it—

*The web of life on Earth is under threat from accelerated climate change. That web compares to a seamless garment and it needs the application of a consistent ethic to protect it, one that considers life now and in the future, and ranges from protection of the unborn child to cherishing the diversity of species. Life is one, and human well-being is at its base interwoven with all life on Earth and the rhythm of its systems. The suffering of any one part means that all creation groans, and rapid global climate change dramatically displays that suffering.*<sup>4</sup>

The *Herald* article went on to say: *The nation's 30 Catholic bishops said ratifying the Kyoto Protocol was the least that Australia could do to continue to 'support international structures that help reduce global warming'.* This was somewhat stronger than the text—

*Internationally, Australia must continue to support structures that help reduce global warming. Strengthening Biodiversity compliance and ratifying the Kyoto Protocol seems minimal.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1990, n. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *Catholic Earthcare Australia* is an ecological agency established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/moral-obligation-to-ratify-kyoto-bishops/2005/11/18/1132016989649.html?oneclick=true>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.catholicearthcareoz.net/climatechange.html#sdendnote14anc>

Part of the *Herald* article, including the assertion of the number of bishops who supported it, is reproduced on the *Catholic Earthcare Australia* website<sup>5</sup>. One can assume, then, the agency does not dispute the accuracy of this figure. Excluding those who have retired and including the three Eastern Rite bishops, the nation has 42 bishops, not 30. It would seem, then, that more than a quarter of Australia's bishops have *not* endorsed the position paper<sup>6</sup>. One bishop (not one of the thirty) commented to the writer privately, 'I do not find it acceptable. It contains very little, and debatable, theology'.

#### *Priorities*

Should the Catholic Church have a position on the state of the environment<sup>7</sup>? Yes. Indeed, Pope John Paul II made it clear in 1990 in his *Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace* that all men have a responsibility over the use of the world's resources.

*In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life. The sense of precariousness and insecurity that such a situation engenders is a seedbed for collective selfishness, disregard for others and dishonesty.*

*Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. The public in general as well as political leaders are concerned about this problem, and experts from a wide range of disciplines are studying its causes. Moreover, a new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programmes and initiatives.*<sup>8</sup>

And he reminded Catholics

*of their serious obligation to care for all of creation. The commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ. Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God (cf. Ps 148:96).*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.catholicearthcareoz.net/conference.html>

<sup>6</sup> This has not prevented the agency arranging for copies of the position paper to be sent to Catholic parishes, schools and religious congregations.

<sup>7</sup> The word *ecology*, it should be observed, has a number of meanings. The Australian *Macquarie Dictionary* lists three. None of them reflect the usage in the bishops' position paper, or that of Pope John Paul II in his *Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace*. In both the word appears to be taken to mean *the present state of balance of biological organisms taken with respect to the ideal state thereof*. It doesn't assist thought to use an equivocal term. In this paper, in lieu of the word 'ecology', we will use the expression *the state of the environment*.

<sup>8</sup> *Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 1990, n. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, n. 16.

But what importance should the issue be given? Bishops and clergy have great responsibilities, and great duties flow from these responsibilities. There is an order in which responsibilities and duties are to be addressed, beginning with those of greatest importance, ending with those of least. Where in that order does concern over the state of the world environment come?

### *Some Distinctions*

In the first place, the state of the world environment concerns man's *material* wellbeing while the primary responsibilities and duties of Catholic bishops and clergy lie with his spiritual wellbeing, the eternal salvation of his soul, and the means to be taken to that end.

Material things have a significant influence on the state of a man's soul but usually in respect of proximate matters only, such as, whether he has sufficient income to support himself and his family; or, the presence in the society in which he lives of peace, order and good government. The state of the world environment concerns man's material wellbeing only remotely<sup>10</sup>.

Next, problems with the state of the environment arise out of abuse of, or selfishness in dealing with, nature's resources in the applications of industry and science and the adoption of those applications by the citizens of the relevant country. The generation of power and the use of motorised transport utilising fossil fuels are together the greatest users of those resources and greatest generators of pollution of the environment. In Australia the average citizen is tied into this usage because it is institutionalised. It is open to each citizen, however, to curb his usage, and his contribution to the harm which may result. But the presence or absence of such ameliorating conduct in each citizen does not necessarily sound immediately in morals. Which is not to deny that it may not, in appropriate circumstances, come to be a moral issue.

Again, the attention a man gives to his duties in respect of material things is a function of the attention he gives to his duties towards spiritual things. Men are negligent about the rights of others, and are selfish (in which is comprehended abuses of nature's gifts and the pollution of the environment) precisely because they lead sinful lives. Every mortal sin involves an abuse of God's gifts. Pope John Paul II put the issue well in his 1990 *Message* in the quote at the head of this paper. He went on to insist on the need to address causes rather than effects—

*Clearly an adequate solution cannot be found merely in a better management or a more rational use of the earth's resources, as important as these may be. Rather, we must go to the source of the problem and face in its entirety that profound moral*

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<sup>10</sup> Which is not to deny that it may, in changed circumstances, become a matter of proximate and immediate concern.

*crisis of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect.*<sup>11</sup>

Paradoxically then, one cannot solve the material problems that confront man without first solving the spiritual, that is, immaterial, problems that he faces. Once sensitivity in moral matters is raised<sup>12</sup>, sensitivity to matters involving the abuse of the other of God's gifts will follow inevitably.

The late Pope went further and tied problems with the state of the environment to man's attitude to his fellow man —

*The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of **respect for life** evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution... **Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress.***<sup>13</sup>

*The Approach of the Bishops' Position Paper*

The bishops' approach to the 'ecological' problem is in marked contrast to that advocated by Pope John Paul. They say —

*This human induced accelerated climate change suggests a lack of understanding for the integrity and the cycles of nature. It raises serious moral and spiritual questions, not just for Catholics but for all Australian citizens and leaders, and calls for a change in our way of life.*

Yet they do not go on to address the fundamental moral and spiritual questions raised by the Pope, or the need for essential change in our way of life. They call for *ecological conversion* and seem, in doing so, to be citing the Pope where he said —

*An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others and for the earth... a true education in responsibility entails a genuine conversion in ways of thought and behaviour... The first educator... is the family, where the child learns to respect his neighbour and to love nature.*<sup>14</sup>

However, Pope John Paul prefaced this comment with the following —

*[T]he seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> In other words, man's sensitivity for the rights of, and his duties towards, his Creator.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, n. 7. Emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, n. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

He was clearly referring to conversion of heart, a fundamental of Catholic theology. Any reference to a turning to practices which might assist the state of the environment—'ecological conversion'—was only secondary.

Nowhere in their position paper do the bishops advert to the Church's teaching on the damage that flows from immoral behaviour. Nor do they call on all Australians to amend their moral way of life. Instead, their approach is to *choose the path of dialogue, solidarity and cooperation that helps all sectors of the community go beyond sectarian interests, secular and religious differences.*

Here, again, is the statement of philosophy underlying the bishops' paper—

*The web of life on Earth is under threat from accelerated climate change. That web compares to a seamless garment and it needs the application of a consistent ethic to protect it, one that considers life now and in the future, and ranges from protection of the unborn child to cherishing the diversity of species. Life is one, and human well-being is at its base interwoven with all life on Earth and the rhythm of its systems. The suffering of any one part means that all creation groans, and rapid global climate change dramatically displays that suffering.<sup>16</sup>*

This is not a Catholic, but a monistic (materialist) world view. It glosses over the essential distinctions between the intellectual, sensitive and vegetative forms of life. The *Herald* journalist's suggestion that the position paper raised the moral level of concern about the welfare of the environment to that to be accorded the unborn child puts the best face on this assertion of principle. A more logical, and frightening, implication is the materialistic one that the life of the unborn child is not to be regarded as superior to that of other living species, a line peddled by the fatuous Peter Singer. The monistic argument *life is one* is also used by pro-abortionists in an endeavour to give their position an appearance of rationality.

The bishops adopt the findings and the predictions of science. If we follow their argument, it is not Christ's Church, through the medium of the Pope, which has explained the problems and pointed out the solution to the world's environmental problems but [*r*]eports of the *International Panel on Climate Change, a body of over 2000 international scientists, and other credible groups.*

The bishops pay lip service to the spiritual element in the debate, but a close reading shows that they limit their analysis to the merely material. They cite twenty instances of what they describe as *Ethical Principles For The Environment*<sup>17</sup> derived

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.catholicearthcareoz.net/climatechange.html#sdendnote14anc>

<sup>17</sup> \* The natural world has value in itself and should not be valued merely for its usefulness to humanity.

\* The world and all in it must be freed from what can be termed a state of suffering.

\* Humans are part of the created world and inextricably part of a material existence.

\* Earth belongs to God and is only on loan to humans who are called to care for it.

\* The choices of humans in their use of the Earth gives humanity a hand in forming its history, a vocation to heightened consciousness within the life of Earth.

from Pope John Paul's 1990 *Message* but they make not one mention there or elsewhere, of the Pope's insistence on the need to address *the source of the problem and face in its entirety [the] profound moral crisis*. Nor do they mention his insistence that *[r]espect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress*.

#### *The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference*

Pope John Paul's 1990 *Message* provides Australia's Catholic bishops with an opportunity to urge mankind to draw the lesson that the crisis in the state of the environment demands a return to moral sanity. It is regrettable that the position paper presented to the *Catholic Earthcare Australia* conference did not do so<sup>18</sup>. It is some consolation to the Catholics in this country to know that a good proportion of their bishops have not endorsed it. Should the members of this group decline to distance themselves from the document, however, it will leave people with the view that it expresses the view of all—*qui tacet consentire*.

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference should issue a definitive paper in which they pay Pope John Paul the compliment of quoting him in context in full. They ought, moreover, to point out that Jesus Christ—the way, the truth and the life—is the only way whereby we can hope to heal a damaged environment.

Michael Baker—13<sup>th</sup> December 2005, *St Lucy*

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- \* Ecological education provides the background for wise and moral decisions.
  - \* There are limits to world resources and the environmental services that Earth can meet before pushing it to a new epoch.
  - \* Global resources are to be managed cooperatively at the local and international levels.
  - \* Excessive demands are imposed on the Earth by nations with a consumerist economy and life-style.
  - \* Restraint, penance and self-imposed limitations are part of authentic human living and are in the tradition of choosing sacrifice for the greater good.
  - \* The fascinating beauty and intricacy deep in the natural world have great value for the artist and for healing the human spirit and body.
  - \* The right to a safe ecological environment is a universal human right.
  - \* Models of development, social structure and styles of technology must integrate environmental factors if there is to be authentic development.
  - \* Super-development, often for the purpose of economic gain, poses an additional threat to the environment.
  - \* The use of genetic engineering poses unknown environmental outcomes when genetic materials are swapped between species. It may threaten food security.
  - \* Warfare has multiple negative environmental impacts and eats up much of the world's financial resources.
  - \* Political leaders at every level have a duty to administer for the good of all. This includes administering prudently a nation's environmental resources..
  - \* Issues of global significance demand solidarity and cooperation at a formal level of international agreements in order to implement change, especially by sharing technology.
  - \* The richer nations have an obligation to dismantle structural forms of global poverty and to help poorer nations experiencing social or environmental problems.
  - \* Future generations should not be robbed or left with extra burdens for they have a claim to a just administration of the world's resources by this generation.

<sup>18</sup> The Australian bishops' apparent activism in favour of the Kyoto Protocol at the expense of more important issues has already been the subject of adverse comment in letters to newspaper editors—cf Letters, in *The Australian*, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2005.