

The state of the environment - a reflection of our inner attitudes

*“Our ability to live is what is at stake”
Al Gore, 2007 Nobel Peace Prize winner*

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This paper has the arduous challenge of covering three extensive public dialogues, on the subject of the Church and the environment, which were organised by the Pastoral Formation Institute and the Environment Commission of the Church in Malta, during the month of May 2008. Apart from considering the role of the Church within the environmental sphere and its relevance to Christian morality and teachings, invited speakers also introduced and reviewed the social, economic, legal and educational contexts. Whilst reflecting on a number of points that were presented and offering some possible actions for the future, this paper is not intended to report the sheer amount of content that was presented and discussed. This paper combines two research methodologies namely biographical and ethnographical, where the author has gathered information directly from his own experiences in addition to published and unpublished sources. Notwithstanding that a number of references and quotations are used to support the author’s views, the content of this paper reflects the sole opinion of the author.

The Environment and the Church

“If our environment is showing us an outwardly degraded condition (pollution, exhaustion and breakdown in nature; violence, terrorism, drug addiction and lawlessness in human nature), this is only the visible face of the invisible qualities within people” (Krueger, Aug 1995)

The above quotation demonstrates the undeniable cause and effect relationship that sin has upon our natural and social environment. If we take a look around us today, what do we see? What are the consequences of our spiritual condition? Do we recognise the root or do we just stop at the symptom? Do we even make the link? The aim of this paper is to reflect upon man’s role and responsibility within a world that is increasingly demonstrating urgent signs of environmental degradation. Some might ask what the environment has to do with Christianity. Others may argue that the future has looked bleak to every generation, since before Christ walked on the earth. Others still, may not even care.

However, if there is one thing that is for certain, it is that Christianity is extremely ecological in its outlook towards the environment and that there is no doubt as to whether Christians have a moral obligation toward the conservation and preservation of creation. The issue however, lies in the fact that not enough of us are aware of these obligations, let alone act upon them, thus not living the full Christian life God desires of us. Just as with other types of sin, where the consequences live on much longer than the action and contribute to the weakening of society’s moral fabric, when it comes to the environment, our sin and its lasting impact suddenly results in symptoms that take on a physical form. Our environmental sins and those of our forefathers have caught up with us and their impact is increasingly visible and being felt around the world.

“The destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth’s resources cause grievances, conflicts and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development” (Pope Benedict XVI, 01/01/07)

Development as a concept has come to mean a lot of different things to different people and it unfortunately does not always result in outcomes that bring advancement or progress. In fact at times, development is known to have brought great social inequalities with the richer countries getting richer and the poorer even poorer. Although it cannot be denied that humanity has progressed incredibly during the last century and that technological development has definitely contributed to improving our quality of life, if we look closer at most developments we may soon come to realise that there is nearly always a price to pay, not matter how big or small.

Politicians and industry, backed by insatiable consumerism and the ‘need’ for constant economic growth, often take decisions and their subsequent environmental consequences into their own hands. Now that we are being faced with social and environmental impacts that represent a bleak scenario that cannot be ignored anymore, we have adopted a reactive attitude by trying to solve the crisis. However as the following quotation attributed to Albert Einstein goes: *“we can’t solve*

problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them” (Wikiquote [online] no date)

In the following sections I will present some of the issues discussed during the three dialogues organised by the Pastoral Formation Institute and the Environment Commission of the Church in May 2008:

- Opportunities and Challenges by Victor Axiaq and Alfred Baldacchino
- Environmental Responsibility by Vince Caruana and Dr Susan Borg
- Environmental Education by Dr Grace Grima and Dr Paul Pace

The Environment and Development

Since the term sustainability has been introduced into the developmental debate, it has been given much prominence, a lot more lip service and rarely put into practice. According to Axiaq, the sustainability debate has an intrinsic fault that inhibits it from achieving its ultimate goal, i.e. that of using non-renewable resources in a manner that allows future generations the ability to use those same resources to meet their own needs.

Axiaq explains that the splitting of man’s activity into confined areas of scientific study, relating to the environment, society and the economy (although necessary) is actually what contributes to the failure of the sustainability concept, by causing undue separation of roles and shedding of responsibility.

The fact that a project can be concluded to be financially viable and then be forwarded to the biologist to address environmental issues, is intrinsically wrong. In addition when substantiating an argument or seeking a sound basis for decision making, scientists are typically consulted and quoted, when certain scientific concepts are based on early principles that may no longer apply or be relevant.

“In a recent message to the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences, Benedict highlighted three key challenges: 1) the environment and sustainable development, 2) respect for the rights and dignity of persons, and 3) the danger of losing spiritual values in a technical world” (Allen [online] (13/05/07)

Alternatively, Axiaq proposes the above mentioned challenges as identified by Pope Benedict XVI as three faces of the same problem and suggests that faith can be the force to bridge the gap between sustainability in concept and in practice, as there is an intimate relationship between faith, justice and the environment. However Axiaq also indicates that although according to scripture humanity is at the forefront of creation, in ecological terms the church needs to move away from the preconception that we are at the centre of the universe and needs to realise that other species also have moral significance.

Baldacchino associates the need to achieve a delicate balance between nature and our relationship to the environment, as a scale which can easily be tipped if change happens too fast. He also reiterates that humanity’s belief that it is above the ecosystem, is false and that science is very far

from understanding nature's complex interactions and interrelationships. On a Christian note, he stresses the need for the church to take on the role as curator and agent of God on this earth, by means of inviting us Christians to recognise our environmental responsibility as an intrinsic part of our faith. In fact the state of the environment is merely the result of our daily choices and for society to heal from this environmental crisis, we need to move away from a materialistic lifestyle void of joy, to one based on spiritual values and that results in a better quality of life for all. There is an urgent need for religion and science to work together to promote responsible leadership and decisions that reflect our knowledge of how to create a link between man and earth.

Our freedom of choice and the effect of that choice on others and creation, leads to issues of responsibility. Our freedom and fallen nature needs to be guided by God's teachings and grace. As to some degree, the relevance of environmental responsibility within a Christian context has been identified and established, the church now needs to work on activating an environmental conscience within all Christians.

The Environment and our Responsibility

Caruana maintains that environmental responsibility is of great relevance to the Christian faith, specifically because man was created in God's image and likeness, raised above all other creatures and was given freedom of choice. In a Christian context, freedom is tied to moral obligations and responsibilities and ought to be guided by a constant desire to seek perfection in God. Unfortunately our fallen nature is all too often drawn towards materialism and instead seeks to achieve monetary value from everything possible.

Taking full responsibility has not been a simple affair as the impacts of our actions are not always immediately visible or identifiable, thus making it easier for society to appease its environmental conscience. When looking at the effects of climate change, once again it is the third world countries that are footing the bill of the developed world's economic and technological activity and success.

In December 2007, De Boer, executive secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (as cited in Van Cotthem, 13/12/07), declared that by 2010, 50 million people would have been forced to leave their homeland because of environmental disasters directly related to climate change. Out of these 50 million 'environmental refugees', the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that half are children (Australian Human Rights Commission, [online] no date).

According to Caruana, environmental refugees are faced with additional difficulties as the present international support systems only recognise and assist people displaced as a result of conflict and not environmental disasters. Today we are facing one of our largest challenges yet - the challenge to change our mindset from deep within and come up with real sustainable alternatives. Technology is a superbly powerful tool but it is not the solution.

Although as acknowledged by Pope John Paul II the *"modern business economy has positive aspects"* based on *"human freedom exercised in the economic field"* (Ioannes Paulus [online] 1991, No. 32), both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI expressed their views on the need for society to move

away from a world based on competition to one based on cooperation. It is in fact this kind of conversion that will result in the development of an economy that places value on social interaction, as opposed to individualism.

Today Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is often the figure economists and politicians quote to measure a country's performance and level of prosperity. However GDP was designed to measure market transactions and totally omits social welfare and quality of life. In fact, *"it often includes the environment on the wrong side of the balance sheet"* (Environmental Economics, n.d.) as polluting and then paying for the subsequent cleanup are both seen as benefitting GDP. In addition leisure time, staying home to raise children, clean air and clean water are either not reflected in the calculation at all or seen as negative factors.

Although new calculations, such as Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) and Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), have been formulated to measure economic progress and social welfare and have shown that *"growth of well-being has not kept pace with that of economic output"*, GDP is still the most popular indicator and the one upon which public policy and decisions are based.

The idea that limits to growth will bring limits to wellbeing is incorrect and although alternatives exist with the potential of leading to a win-win situation, such initiatives rarely attain the political engagement and commitment required, in order to be successfully adopted at a national and international level.

In addition, for environmental protection to be truly effective, it also requires a sound legal basis. During her session on environmental law, Dr Borg offered a glimpse into the legal intricacies surrounding the environmental debate and the limitations of the current legal system, together with the importance for the general public to understand that environmental law does not live in a vacuum but rather within a much larger legal system of rights, such as human rights, the right to freely own and enjoy property, aspects of governance, etc.

"Environmental law is a body of law, which is a system of complex and interlocking statutes, common law, treaties, conventions, regulations and policies which seek to protect the natural environment which may be affected, impacted or endangered by human activities" (HG.Org [online] no date)

When it comes to retribution for environmental wrongs suffered, the public often feels let down by the legal system. This sense of injustice typically occurs as the general public does not always understand the way the legal system works and that one has to have a right to something before one can claim that that very right has been infringed. In addition the law is still far from meeting today's needs and offering real environmental protection as it still tries to apply, what Dr Borg refers to as a *"push-button solution"*, that does not seek to identify the root of the degradation but merely offers a cosmetic solution.

When it comes to public resources such as open spaces, the atmosphere and the water table, achieving environmental protection is even more challenging. At times the situation is further aggravated if government abdicates its environmental responsibility by setting up an environmental

authority or agency. This may offer a tempting opportunity to shift the burden, when as such resides with government and the politicians who are ultimately answerable to the people.

However, as Dr Borg also explained, the environmental sphere is actually one of the few areas where the people can make their voice heard. At an EU level, governance i.e. the way in which the Union uses the powers given to it by its citizens, is increasingly seeking to promote “*fashionable political ideas of participation*” (Lee, 2005). This concept of participation is also enshrined in the Aarhus Convention, granting the public three fundamental rights of access to information, public participation in the decision-making process and access to justice.

The environmental crisis has also served to emphasise the innate link between morality and environmental legal responsibility by accentuating the brotherhood of mankind. The Catholic Church is at the forefront of social justice and apart from identifying environmental pollution as one of the newly classified seven deadly sins, the Apostolic Penitentiary also lists causing poverty and social inequality and injustice as mortal sins. The environment is a wakeup call to Christians, as peace and justice are equated with the whole of creation and not just for man.

The Environment and Education

In line with the previous two dialogues, the subject of environmental education was also tackled by two speakers. Dr Grima, introduced the current educational system in the EU and more specifically in Malta, in addition to giving a very detailed description of the lessons learnt from the past and the current educational reform in progress.

Out of the various relevant topics discussed, “*informal education*” (specifically through the mass media) is the one that is of greatest interest to me, as I believe that whether together with or apart from formal education, it is an extremely powerful and totally underutilised (by the church) communication channel, which has been employed to set trends and fashions as well as form identities, ideas and public opinion. Ironically, the power of the mass media was only brought up by a single person from the floor, who rightly pointed out the influence of this medium and the success enjoyed by many organisations that have used it to create and sustain artificial psychosocial needs. I will elaborate on this subject and the vast opportunities that it presents the church with, further on in the next section.

Dr Pace introduced the subject of environmental education as ideally being nothing more than quality education and stressed the importance for children to experience what they learn on a first-hand basis. As mentioned earlier, the result of environmental education being broken down into the various areas of scientific study results in different departments not communicating and sharing knowledge between them.

A Way Forward

Malta at large is becoming a secular society living out of an increasingly frail traditional skin, where ongoing radical change is constantly taking place between one generation and the next. To this

effect, in a recent article that appeared in the local media, Monsignor Paul Cremona, Archbishop of Malta recently pointed out that:

Many Maltese Catholics have an outdated model of the Church and of its relationship to society. Many live in a past which no longer exists – (Archbishop Paul Cremona, 19/10/08)

On the other hand I also believe that the institution, that is responsible for proclaiming the good news and nurturing society's relationship with God, also carries much responsibility for the above scenario as according to Gellel & Sultana, as times changed the church in Malta failed to portray and secure a position of relevance in today's society.

It is plausible to assume that an institutionally oriented discourse might have contributed to widening of the gap between society and the Church. Similarly, in these past years, the Church rarely contributed to the definition of a national identity which was high on the agenda on various occasions, this notwithstanding the fact that the Church did have the language and the resources not only to contribute to the discussion but to propose new modes of constructing Maltese identity (Gellel & Sultana)

As a result, although the Catholic tradition is still a distinguishing part of Malta's local culture, it is quickly losing its weight as a guiding set of beliefs and practices, in shaping local identity and social interaction, based on the collective reflection of each individual's relationship with Christ. Instead, globalisation and the mass media bombard society incessantly with secular messages and images promoting a vast number of diverse values, many incongruent with church teachings.

Essentially the church is not only faced with the challenge of proving that its teachings are still (if not even more) relevant today but also of making its voice heard amongst the rest of the noise and messages that reach society via an increasing number of communication channels and devices. With regard to the subject of environment and the church, our relationship with creation is just one message out of a whole value system and beliefs that the church needs to get across.

So where to from here?

It is my opinion that the environment is one of the few remaining opportunities that the church has to re-launch itself and the relevance of its teachings in today's modern world. It is almost a clean slate where, by means of using the environment as an intercultural puncture point, the church has a chance of positioning itself as an international organisation that has mass appeal, relevance and importance across the board. It also offers a common platform upon which to practice ecumenism in its broadest sense.

However, using romanticism by means of portraying the picture-perfect landscape, as a means of fostering environmental respect will not work anymore. Organisations do not see beauty they see opportunity to make more profit. At a personal level each and every one of us has to play our part but the institution of the church needs to act as a catalyst to change, by constantly and consistently

promoting respect and conversion. As Christian ecology is only one aspect of the church's value system, the church may use this as an initial step to awaken the latent Christian and possibly attract the Anonymous Christian.

However to do so, the church must enter the communications arena and compete for the people's attention, as doing anything less than that is virtually giving up on its duty to proclaim the good news and guide God's flock to salvation. Gone are the times when the state, the church and the elite were the major social influences. Companies spend huge marketing budgets on studying their target groups' profiles, needs and wants. Market research draws on a number of social sciences such as economics, psychology, sociology, social psychology and anthropology to study and manipulate consumer behaviour – how people buy, what they buy, when they buy and why they buy.

As the known adage goes, 'knowledge is power' and such knowledge paired with constant, repetitive, interactive, audio-visual and social promotion, does not leave the church with much of a chance, even if the majority of the faithful attend a weekly, forty-five minute mass and especially if religion is a matter of tradition without conviction or conversion.

If in antiquity it was already considered hard enough for the devout early Christians to follow Christ, we are only too familiar with how difficult it is today when the world is blatantly and publically (on a much larger scale) pushing us to satisfy our every whim or deepest desires, to keep buying and consume more, bigger, better and faster products or services that will help us improve ourselves and achieve the illusive happiness and fulfilment until the next bigger, better and faster thing comes along. We have waged an endless, self consuming, psychological, emotional and why not, even spiritual war upon ourselves in honour of mammon, yet to the detriment of our soul, our body and our own very existence and that of our planet Earth.

The church is therefore in dire need of 'upgrading' the way in which it communicates its message and positions its image and of finding its place side by side, if not ahead of the heaps of secular images being targeted at the public from every possible angle. As Marshall McLuhan, author of *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) put it – *"the medium is the message"...* *"meaning that the form of a medium embeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived, creating subtle change over time."*

The institution of the church has no option but to take on the challenge by stepping up on its environmental responsibility in practice as well as by means of organising a carefully planned, long-term and ongoing communications programme. Although it is appreciated that locally, the church already has a small radio and television presence, what is being proposed here is a formal change management strategy both in practice, as well as through the media. The medium may influence how the message is perceived but it will not be the binding factor that will bring about actual change.

First of all, the church needs to lead by example and just like the Vatican set itself the objective of becoming the first carbon neutral state (ROLSKI, 18/09/07), there are a number of initiatives that the local institution may take on board. Setting environmentally friendly policies to change all bulbs in church-owned properties to energy savers in the immediate term and migrating to solar water

heating in the short to medium term, are the bare minimum that will also indirectly result in cost savings. In the short to medium term the church also needs to embed the concept of Christian ecology into the clergy, the lay persons and the congregation at large. There are several other initiatives that the church needs to address, such as actively promoting fair trade, sustainable development and the plight of environmental refugees, just to mention a few.

In order to reflect the relevance of environmental responsibility to all sections of society as well as to boost the church's media coverage, the church could consider teaming up with known and reputable entities and use the environment as a common platform upon which to initiate communication and joint activities.

Once successful in creating and maintaining its reputation as a legitimate stakeholder in the communication and promotion of social values through popular media, the church may eventually consider proposing the drafting and signing of a voluntary charter or code of conduct for responsible and ethical advertising and corporate social responsibility. This could initially relate to the promotion of values, images and messages that reflect environmentally responsible behaviour, followed by a lateral move into other areas such as the avoidance of promoting antisocial, individualistic and near anarchistic attitudes, in order to attract attention to products and increase sales.

In line with Monsignor Paul Cremona's proposed way forward (Acts of the Apostles chapter 2 & 4) for a renewed Christianity in Malta, the church as the body of Christ and guided through the Holy Spirit, must be courageous in its endeavours to bring about real change in our hearts and minds and must not choke in the face of criticism but instead always seek to learn from and stand up for the truth.

Earlier on I mentioned the Vatican's objective to become the first carbon-neutral state by *"offsetting its entire emissions for 2007 through planting trees to restore an ancient forest in Hungary"* (Lean & Kay 30/03/2008). This has not come without criticism, as experts claim the Vatican actually *"cheated" ... "as the true champion will have to achieve carbon neutrality at home"* (Lean & Kay 30/03/2008). It is felt that to truly achieve that title, the Vatican would also need to counter the environmental impact from the transport of the thousands of delegates to and from the Vatican as well as the environmental impact of all its offices outside of the Vatican.

In such a situation, although the initiative is extremely commendable and avant-garde, not getting the facts right or simply overstating a claim can actually counter the whole activity and related benefits. Nonetheless, the Vatican has taken a bold step in setting an example through concrete action. It is now up to each of the international Catholic dioceses to follow suit and adopt the same environmental ethic.

Conclusion

In December 2007, Pope Benedict warned against using climate change and associated prophecies of gloom, as a means of eliciting support for certain proposed solutions, that in turn may be based on dubious ideologies as opposed to firm evidence (Caldwell, 31/12/07). When such decisions with global effects need to be taken, the pontiff is most certainly right in warning about the basis of such

rationality. However, in line with Albert Einstein's reasoning, that of seeking a solution in a different mindset than the one that created it, we cannot keep insisting that environmental solutions need to be found, whilst maintaining that man's right to survival is above nature's. Conditions such as *"reaching agreement on a model of sustainable development capable of ensuring the well-being of all while respecting environmental balances"* (Pope Benedict XVI as cited in Caldwell, 31/12/07) reflect the old split attitude of trying to keep doing what we've always done while trying to improve the status quo from an environmental perspective. Man and the environment are one. God gave man breath of life but his body came from and will return to dust and therefore our body is an intricate part of God's ecosystem, depends upon creation and cannot be separated from it.

The time when fear of the afterlife was used as a motivator for compliance is over, especially since today so many people live for the moment by seeking "instant gratification" with no second thought to what tomorrow may bring, let alone death. If the church wants to win back its flock then Monsignor Paul Cremona is right, we need to let go of our traditional approach, as intimidating as embracing the unknown may seem and we must work to lead by example and inspire people to change and to want to be part of the body of Christ. This is not a matter of re-inventing the Christian wheel but merely communicating the core messages and values more effectively and in sync with the reality of the target audience.

As opposed to what some critics may feel, the church as a member of civil society has the right and obligation to lobby for what it believes is of relevance to society. The church on the other hand must not shy away from criticism and must be ready to defend its stand.

However, if left unattended, the fate of the Church in Malta can be compared to that of the traditional Luzzu - a hand-built and colourfully painted, wooden boat whose technique is believed to have been passed down from generation to generation since the times of the Phoenicians, with a track record of keeping its passengers safe in rough seas. Although an icon of the Maltese archipelago, a much loved symbol of local heritage and a favourite subject for artists and photographers alike, it has nonetheless remained behind the times and notwithstanding some cosmetic alterations such as changing lateen sails for diesel engines, it is nonetheless destined to become a museum piece. Even though locals look upon the Maltese Luzzu with a sense of pride and nostalgia, when it comes to the crunch, trends show that modern fibreglass boats are consistently chosen above tradition, as they are cheaper to build, easier to maintain and come with all the new safety features, technological gadgets and designs.

In comparison, the church must choose whether it wants to hold on tightly to its tried and tested, yet decreasing image at the end of its lifecycle, which typically demonstrates negative returns with regard to its member base and relevance to modern times or whether it wants to take on the challenge and base itself on the supremacy of its Christian values and teachings, by re-positioning itself within the modern context that it finds itself in today, with a view to the future.

With regard to our environmental responsibility, sustainable development dictates that we should make use of our resources in a manner that allows for future generations to meet their own needs. Well, today's impacts of yesterday's generations are becoming clearer as my generation, which is

yesterday's future generation, is already suffering huge consequences. I can't but wonder, what world am I going to leave for my children?

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A few relevant bible quotations:

Psalm 96:10-13. The Lord reigns... Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad, let the seas resound and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy, they will sing before the Lord for He comes, He comes to judge the earth.

Psalm 19:1. The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.

Isaiah 55:12-13. The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. All this will be a memorial for the Lord, a sign that for all time will not be cut off.

Rev 5:13. Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb, be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever."

Job 12:7-10. But ask the animals, and they will teach you; or birds of the air and they will tell you; or speak to the earth and it will teach you; or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the lord has done this. In His hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind.

Genesis 1:26. Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Lev. 25:23-24. The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

Jer. 2:7. I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and you made my inheritance detestable.

Genesis 9:8-9. Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: "I now establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you - the birds, the livestock, and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you - every living Creature on the earth."