
SOCIAL APOSTOLATE

THEORY • PROCEDURE • ACTION

LIVING WITH NATURE

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There are today two approaches to the question of pollution and of how we should treat the environment, typified, I think, by the following sample question from a public opinion poll:

Now I'd like to read you some statements about **energy** made by two people. Please tell me which one comes closest to your own opinion.

Mr. Jones says that it is okay to cause some disruption in the environment if that's what it takes to find and produce enough energy to make sure that the country has a good economy with plenty of jobs.

Mr. Smith says that we must not disturb or harm the environment, even if it means that we have fewer jobs or a weaker economy. (1)

Thus on the one hand are those who favor economic development in spite of "disruption" in the environment; on the other are people who oppose anything that would injure the environment, even if the economy and people suffer as a result. There is debate about whether the economy or the environment is more important, but no debate about whether there is a conflict between them. It is assumed that it is a question of a strong economy with enough jobs vs. a clean environment.

True, some compromise is considered possible, in that only "some disruption in the environment" may be necessary, but basically both parties to this question see it as man vs. nature, jobs vs. clean air and water. Efforts at compromise are invariably some attempt to reconcile two conflicting attitudes, e.g., pure wilderness in one place and development in another, or only some development, which will only partially damage the environment. But an antagonism is assumed, and the best that is hoped for is an uneasy balance.

Must Man's Activity Upset Ecological Harmony?

I think both these approaches to the problem are wrong, and all compromises between them likewise mistaken because they incorporate the premise of each side that there is an opposition

between man's activity and ecological harmony. Both views, of course, contain elements of truth, but as total theories they are mistaken.

The pro-environmentalist position, while not always stated in its most extreme form can, I think, be logically reduced to it. In this view earth's environment and its ecological balance must be preserved; man has not right to pollute or destroy or even to alter. The earth would be better off without man, but if he must exist, let him live the life of a primitive hunter gatherer, without permanent habitations changing the earth as little as possible. Thus man is seen as an anomaly among earth's creatures, in that only he changes what is natural, rocks, hills and streams, by producing artificial things, products of human arts, which are thought to jar with nature's beauty and harmony.

This argument obviously denies any legitimacy to man as man. For man is a rational, political animal. Of his own nature he lives in cities and constructs societies which allow things such as universities, the intellectual life, the theater, etc. to exist and flourish. To live in such a state is natural to man; it is really the state of nature, man's own nature.

Christian View of Man Differs

But such a civilized existence demands a division of labor and at least some technology. It necessitates some alteration in untouched hillsides and fields. But to the extreme environmentalist argument any human work - not just a chemical plant or a nuclear reactor - spoils the earth. According to this view, man has less of a right to live his own specific life on this planet than any other kind of animal. But, of course, this is false, since God himself placed us here and commanded us, " 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth.' " (Genesis 1:28, Jerusalem Bible)

No Christian, then, can accept the environmentalist view as I sketch it here, but are we required to understand Genesis in such a way that we embrace the other position, that of the developmentalists? Their thesis, though often expressed more

moderately, logically resolves itself into the proposition that no industrial or technological activity affecting nature is wrong if it benefits man. The discovery that a beautiful mountain stream is polluted is of no importance, unless it can be shown that it has some adverse affect, direct or indirect, on man. Even then the bad consequences must be measured against whatever good results the pollution is a by-product of. This point of view can be used to support both businessmen's profits and workers' jobs, and is often used in favor of the latter with much plausibility in opposition to the extreme environmentalist position.

Now what is wrong with this view? It is certainly innocent of not allowing man a place on the earth. Indeed, it sometimes appears as if it is only man to whom any place at all is allotted. One fault certainly, then, of this view, is a failure to consider man's task as being steward or keeper of creation, not exploiter.

But I think the root of this view's error goes much deeper. This position fails not in regard to nature, but in regard to man, for it does not even allow a proper place for him, that is, a human place. Instead of asking what is the end, the purpose, of civilization, of technical development, of the GNP, to what in man's life is it contributing, development is sought simply for a combination of financial and material rewards, greater luxury, a higher standard of living. As I said above, man certainly requires a fairly complex civilization in order for the specifically human to flourish, but production for the sake of production, or material goods for the sake of material goods, is entirely another thing.

Now if it is granted that material development is good only if oriented toward a proper end, then what may be said of that kind of development most strongly objected to by environmentalists, e.g., a chemical plant belching noisome and noxious fumes into the air and ugly and harmful discharges into rivers and streams? Environmentalists' emotional response to such things is quite correct, as far as it goes. But their effort to ground this response in a rational examination of the question, is, as I argued above, misguided. For what we essentially have here in the case of the chemical plant, is a gross example of development unrelated to any valid human goal, and which, at the same time, fundamentally violates man's function as a steward. The earth's resources are meant for use, for the proper end of fostering **human** life, which is not just life by man but life as man. This surely includes technological development, but just as obviously, the fact, so

patent to environmentalists, that ugly, poisonous, smelly, air and water promote no kind of human value.

Some might imagine that a compromise or fusion of the environmentalist and developmentalists views would bring about a desirable program of action. Indeed, the views of the less extreme, either of developmentalists or environmentalists, constitute such sort of compromise. And, in some cases, for accidental reasons, practical measures advocated as a result of such a compromise might bring about a wise program or two. But because both views are at bottom false, no amalgamation or blend of them could possibly be true.

Man: The Good Steward

What is the correct view of the matter? It is, I think, this. Man was meant to live on this earth, to develop after his own nature, but to care for and live with the rest of creation in such a way that he uses, but does not destroy or warp it. We must insist on a distinction between using and abusing the earth. Not every alteration of fields or streams is wrong; man has a right to make the changes necessary for a developed culture. Developed, that is, according to human nature. Too often we consider development in itself a good; rather development can be good, but there is also such a thing as misdevelopment. Man is not meant to live as a primitive; this is not his natural state. But in most of the West there has been a considerable amount of misdevelopment in the past several hundred years, and especially lately. I am not suggesting a limit on technological growth - that would be absurd - but only that it develop in accordance with man's nature, his real needs, and his purpose on earth. If technology truly respects man it will respect nature.

Some technologies that we have developed fulfill these criteria admirably. (2) Organic farming is a nearly perfect example of what I have in mind. This method of agriculture uses the soil for food production for man's needs, but it uses it in such a way that it is not exhausted, its mineral content is not drained. Moreover, it does not require chemical plants to manufacture fertilizers. But it is fully capable of producing yields equal to those of chemical farming.

Wind and water, though I do not suggest that these two sources of power can suffice for all our needs, likewise use and alter, but do not abuse or destroy, nature and her forces. In fact, much of 19th-century technology is well suited for our purposes, and an afternoon looking at 19th-century patents can be very worthwhile. But of course we cannot stop with the 19th century's

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achievements, and many more recent inventions, such as passive solar collectors, are excellent. However, many practices of earlier times are still useful, such as the half-forgotten architectural trick of the correct placing of porches, windows and shade trees to take full advantage of the sun and seasons.

What we must get away from is the attitude, embodied in the questionnaire I quoted above, that enhancement of human life necessarily conflict with preservation of nature. There never need be any opposition between what really are two duties, the development of human life and civilization, and our use and care of the natural environment.

REFERENCES

(1) Stuart Rothenberg et al. *Ethnic Voters and National Issues*. Washington: Free Congress Research & Educational Foundation, 1982, p. 118. Emphasis in original.

(2) I am indebted to Mr. Charles Strayer for suggesting examples of appropriate technology.

American Episcopal Secretariat, said, "We are seeking to call the attention of the international community so that the classification of refugees, displaced people or immigrants can be revised. He placed the number of refugees and immigrants in the region at 2.2 million and said they were the "product of the insane violence unleashed here." 2/20/85 News.

SANTA ROSA, Costa Rica — Thousands of Nicaraguan refugees, fleeing a stepped-up military draft in their country, are flooding Costa Rica in a human tidal wave. Said Benjamin Piza, Costa Rica's minister of public security, "We cannot cope with it ourselves. It has to be an international effort."

Mr. Piza said 3,000 Nicaraguans arrived last week (March 16, 1985) and he expects the rate to increase as the Nicaraguan Sandinista army searches for more young men to meet its draft calls.

"They're bringing in diseases that we wiped out long ago," said Mr. Piza. "We have malaria again in Costa Rica, for the first time in 15 years ... but I don't know what we can do. We have to let them in. We can't just shoot the people at the border." (Washington Times 3/19/85)

JACALEAPA, Honduras — This would appear to be a typical Honduran town; dusty, unpaved streets, sleeping dogs, banana and orange trees, tile-roofed clay and wooden buildings, an occasional bus passing through. But it has a distinction. It has more Nicaraguan (1,850) than Honduran (1,500) residents.

Located about 15 miles north of the border with Nicaragua, virtually the entire town has been con-

ICA: THERE ARE YOUR

to a refugee camp. The refugee population most daily as people flee Nicaragua. Some Nicaraguans entered Honduras last year and as refugees. No one knows the total of refugees, however, because many did not register. This year the number may be even greater. An increasing number of youths flee the Sandinista military draft.

The personal motives of the refugees for fleeing Nicaragua vary. All however speak of oppression, fear and lack of freedom. A word frequently heard is "groserias" — excesses.

Vallardo Antonio Santeliz, 28, was a lay evangelical preacher in the city of Leon. "We were not in accord with the Sandinistas. They are communists. They are atheists. We were their enemies," they said.

According to Mr. Antonio, Sandistas came to a meeting house one day and found him and two "brothers" or fellow refugees. "They tied us up," he said. "They threw gasoline on us and then incendiary bombs. The other two died carbonized. I was saved by God's will."

He was able to run away and was cared for by "brothers". With the help of the rebels, it took him 18 days to get to Honduras. Today his face, ears, and arms are badly disfigured by the burns.

Maria Julia Altamirano, 24, fled in November, 1982 with her mother and two daughters, 7 and 8. With a group of some 40 other people, they walked for five days to reach Honduran sanctuary. Mrs. Altamirano, a widow and former coffee worker, said, "The Sandinista commit groserias. They are unjust. They took a man out of his house, said he was a Contra (anti-Sandinista rebel) and killed him. We knew he wasn't a Contra." (2/15/85)

The (Kenkel-Vogelweid) team from St. Louis consisted of Catholic lay persons who went to the area with the aim of assessing the spiritual and physical needs of yet more refugees in this world, and they say that what they say has changed their lives forever. (Globe-Democrat, Feb. 9-10, 1985)