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## *Ecological Conversion* and Its Pastoral Ministry as a Stipulation for True Reconciliation

This article presents ecological conversion as a necessary condition for true reconciliation in light of the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* and other papal statements. Ecological conversion is imperative because sin affects man's relationship with the created world. The essence of ecological conversion depends primarily on acknowledging the truth about man's role in the world and the fact that there is a limited amount of natural resources. The Church does not confine itself to theoretical deliberations; rather, She desires to guide pastoral reconciliation, in which the sacraments, catechesis, and dialogue with other views and concepts of the world play a particular role.

**Keywords:** ecology, conversion, reconciliation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.

Christian moral doctrine, which is based on the findings of exegesis and biblical theology, emphasizes that man harmony with God, others, himself, and the universe that surrounds him was destroyed as a result of sin.<sup>1</sup> Only in recent decades, however, have theologians systematically considered man's relationship with the created world and how it is necessary to establish harmony between them.

Because the Christian community, which teaches about penance and reconciliation and celebrates the sacraments, participates in ecological conversion, this article aims to present certain aspects of man's reconciliation with creation.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 4. Hereafter abbreviated as RP.

## The Disruption of the Harmony Between Man and Creation

Extraordinary transformations have taken place in the world in recent centuries. Man has increasingly mastered methods of production and largely subjected to himself the forces of nature. Exclusionism has increasingly contributed to these types of changes. The proponents of exclusionism base their views on a false idealism that decisively severs man from the world that surrounds him and denies that man depends on the environment in any way.<sup>2</sup> According to this concept, man is superior to the world and, therefore, independent from the world in the sense that he exercises complete authority over it. Exclusionists essentially treat man as if he were not a part of nature. Consequently, their sole focus on man induces them to blindly promote current trends in development, among which the most prevalent and significant are technology and urbanization.<sup>3</sup>

Man's uncontrolled activity in the aforementioned areas has led to "ecological crisis,"<sup>4</sup> meaning a decisive moment that will significantly and negatively impact what the world will look like in the years and centuries to come. Experts have pointed out that the disappearing biodiversity in flora and fauna; the greenhouse effect; the depletion of and holes in the ozone layer; far-reaching desertification; erosion; land, water, and air pollution; and the presence of heavy metals in living organisms are symptoms of this crisis.<sup>5</sup>

The lack of harmony in the natural world and the consequences of sin are interconnected. So-called "ecological refugees," meaning people who must repeatedly take all of their possessions, leave the places in which they have been living, and face extremely difficult

<sup>2</sup> See J. Nagórny, *Ekologiczna płaszczyzna troski o życie i zdrowie*, "Roczniki Teologiczne" 47(2000), z. 3, pg. 126.

<sup>3</sup> See J. Grzesica, *W stronę etyki ekologicznej*, "Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne" 13(1980), pg. 144; K. Smykowski, *Podstawowe zasady ekologii ludzkiej. Refleksje teologa moralisty w oparciu o nauczanie Jana Pawła II i Benedykta XVI*, in *Człowiek z perspektywy religii, rodziny i szkoły*, H. Czakowska, M. Kuciński (eds.), Bydgoszcz 2013, pg. 135.

<sup>4</sup> When recognizing the great threats that changes in the natural environment present, John Paul II used the expression "ecological catastrophe" and called on all people of good will to take decisive steps to prevent these irreversible consequences. Por. John Paul II, General Audience: *God made man the steward of creation*, (01.17.2001), 4. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_aud\\_20010117.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html)

<sup>5</sup> See S. Zięba, *Natura i człowiek w ekologii humanistycznej*, Lublin 1998, pgs. 203-204.

challenges due to the degradation of natural resources, are an example of this interconnectedness.<sup>6</sup> This serious issue clearly depicts how a lack of respect for the surrounding world is always due to a man's lack of charity towards his neighbor.

Man's lack of respect and failure to responsibly care for the gift of creation are also offenses against God and manifestations of man's lack of unity within himself, which is expressed in man's loss of his own identity as well as his rejection of the truth about his unique place in the hierarchy of being and his unique mission in and toward the world.

## The Essence and Expressions of Ecological Conversion

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* emphasizes that reconciliation is always inextricably linked with penance and conversion. It is impossible to separate these realities because, in doing so, the essence of each is lost.<sup>7</sup>

When analyzing man's need for reconciliation with all of creation, ecological conversion should be considered a condition for reconciliation. In contemporary awareness, the concept of ecological conversion is evident in social advertising campaigns aimed at promoting and instilling pro-ecological attitudes in people—attitudes that are truly Christian and which John Paul II addressed in his teachings.<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI developed these teachings, stating that “the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our life-style and the prevailing models of consumption and production, which are often unsustainable from a social [...] point of view.”<sup>9</sup> It is every person's duty to be responsible and care for the created world.<sup>10</sup>

Conversion is closely associated with the virtue of humility, which enables man to control his desire to be important and great. It also requires man to truthfully look at himself and to take limitations and conditioning into account.<sup>11</sup> In this regard, an attitude of ecological

<sup>6</sup> See Benedict XVI, Message for the World Day of Peace *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (1.01.2010), 4. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20091208\\_xliii-world-day-peace.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html) (Accessed: 05.04.2018).

<sup>7</sup> See RP, 4.

<sup>8</sup> See John Paul II, *God made man the steward...*, op. cit., 4.

<sup>9</sup> See Benedict XVI, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace ...*, op. cit., 11.

<sup>10</sup> See Ibid; Francis, *Laudato Si*, 217. Hereafter abbreviated as LS.

<sup>11</sup> See LS, 220; C. Wichrowicz, *Zarys teologii moralnej w ujęciu tomistycznym*, Cracow 2002, pg. 297.

conversion means acknowledging the truth about the man's role and mission in the world. According to the original plan of God the Creator, man's should "communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble 'master' and 'guardian,' and not as a heedless 'exploiter' and 'destroyer.'"<sup>12</sup> Man's vocation is to cooperate in perfecting creation. God entrusts the matter that he intelligently creates to man, who is capable of understanding and actively developing and transforming creation.<sup>13</sup> The more man realizes these truths, the more his sense of responsibility for the environment will increase.<sup>14</sup>

In caring for the created world, it is essential that man remember that he cannot arbitrarily and with impunity use and manipulate elements of the natural world to solely meet his economic needs.<sup>15</sup> Recalling the principle that goods have a universal purpose induces man to accept the truth that the environment is a gift for all people, and the universality of the world's goods also applies to future generations. Caring for those who will participate in creating members of the human family is a moral obligation. The interconnectedness of all peoples throughout history is not only beneficial in the sense that a specific generation can make use of the goods of their predecessors, but it also entails concrete obligations.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, John Paul II's words spoken in his native land are of the essence: "The beauty of this land inclines me to cry out for its preservation for future generations. If you love this land, do not let my call go unanswered! [...] All people of good will should cooperate in this great work. May every disciple of Christ examine his lifestyle, so that the legitimate pursuit of prosperity does not drown out the voice of conscience that considers what is just and truly good."<sup>17</sup>

The teachings of the Church discuss the issue of caring for the natural world from the perspective of the commandment to love God and one's neighbor. This commandment involves reconciliation between man and: God, his neighbor, himself, and the created world. Such an

<sup>12</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> See Benedict XVI, General Audience: *Safeguarding of Creation* (08.26.2009), 3.

<sup>14</sup> S. Nowosad, *Antropologiczno-etyczny wymiar ekologii*, in *Ekologia. Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*, J. Nagórny, J. Gocko (ed.), Lublin 2002, pg. 64; K. Smykowski, *Podstawowe zasady ekologii ludzkiej...*, op. cit., pg. 140.

<sup>15</sup> See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> See J. Nagórny, *Ekologiczna płaszczyzna troski o życie i zdrowie...*, op. cit., pg. 134.

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, Speech during the Liturgy of the Word: *Piękno tej ziemi woła o zachowanie jej dla przyszłych pokoleń* (06.12.1999), 4.

approach does not, however, invalidate the value of nature as such. Rather, separating the values of the environment from its relationship with God and with man deepens man's alienation. Man must protect the environment foremost in order to ensure the conditions necessary for his personal and social development as well as to realize his need for love and contemplation.<sup>18</sup>

Man's reconciliation with the world of animals has a particular place within his reconciliation with all of creation. Animals have an important place in the hierarchy of being, and some animals are closely related phylogenetically to man. Scientific research and ordinary observation reveal that animals have the ability to feel physical and chemical stimuli, including pain and stress. Man has often treated animals cruelly throughout the ages, and such behavior occurs even today.<sup>19</sup>

Ecological conversion that leads to man's reconciliation with the created world must be expressed in man's recognition of his responsibility toward animals, which he realizes when contemplating the very nature of animals. These obligations demand that man respect animals on a moral level and on the level of rights. These obligations can justifiably and analogically be called animal rights that entail an obligation to: respect the works of the Creator, respect the nature of animals, and to relate benevolently and sensitively to the value of their nature and existence.<sup>20</sup>

## The Ministry of Reconciliation with Creation

The mission of the Church is not only to determine the conditions that are necessary for man's reconciliation with God, others, himself, and the created world, but also to guide the ministry of reconciliation in order to incline the heart of man to convert, do penance, and offer the gift of reconciliation. This is the essence of the Church's mission,<sup>21</sup> and it is an incredibly important aspect of the new evangelization.

<sup>18</sup> J. Nagórny, *Ekologiczna płaszczyzna troski o życie i zdrowie...*, op. cit., pgs. 135-136; K. Smykowski, *Podstawowe zasady ekologii ludzkiej...*, op. cit., pg. 141.

<sup>19</sup> *Ekologiczny apel Rady Społecznej przy Biskupie Płockim* – <http://diecezjaplocka.pl/dla-wiernych/aktualnosci/072017/ekologiczny-apel-rady-spoecznej-przy-biskupie-plockim> (10.18.2017).

<sup>20</sup> See LS, 218; J. Wróbel, *Zwierzęta i ich prawa*, in *Prawa człowieka. W 60. rocznicę uchwalenia Powszechnej Deklaracji Praw Człowieka. Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*, K. Jeżyna, T. Zadykiewicz (eds.), Lublin 2010, pgs. 95-102.

<sup>21</sup> See RP, 23.

When considering the topic of the ministry of penance and reconciliation, John Paul II indicated various means that lead to these ends: catechesis and the sacraments, which find their source in Jesus Christ, as well as a method of dialogue that has been used in ecclesial practice since the time of Pope Paul VI.<sup>22</sup>

## Dialogue

In the pastoral ministry of penance and reconciliation, the Church enters into a dialogue with various communities in order to ensure the most fruitful exchange of views with the human community. With regard to reconciliation with all of creation, it is necessary to take into consideration certain ecological trends. Although many holistic and biocentric concepts of the world are objectionable because they do not perceive that the source of the world is anthropological and because, consequently, these concepts are a kind of ideology or worldview,<sup>23</sup> dialogue with those who ascribe to these worldviews is necessary. Certainly those who adhere to a holistic and biocentric understanding of the world have made people aware of the need to protect the natural environment. The church does not fail to affirm these essential values and recognizes that they have contributed to shaping people's sense of responsibility for the future of the world.<sup>24</sup>

Similarly, it is necessary to approach utilitarianism in the same manner, since this approach currently dominates bioethics. According to utilitarian principles, sensory perception is the source of morality and the scope of one's duties and obligations. Like humans, animals have sensory perception. Therefore, utilitarians argue that, since animals are like humans, animals should also have their own rights. Since this utilitarian approach does not affirm the dignity of the human person by reducing ethical qualifications only to a person's ability to sense negative stimuli, Christian moral thought does not uphold this approach as true. Nevertheless, this erroneous approach has sensitized the human community to the fate of animals and, consequently, has inspired Christian thinkers to analogically consider the theory of animal rights as an alternative to utilitarian views.

<sup>22</sup> See Ibid, 24.

<sup>23</sup> See M. Wyrostkiewicz, *Ekologia ludzka. Osoba i jej środowisko z perspektywy teologicznomoralnej*, Lublin 2007, pg. 70.

<sup>24</sup> See K. Smykowski, *Podstawowe zasady ekologii ludzkiej...*, pg. 139.

## Catechesis

The Church contributes to the ministry of reconciliation through catechesis, which takes on different forms (e.g., homilies, lectures, discussions, meetings, or courses on religion) depending on the situation.<sup>25</sup> The Church emphasizes the importance of preaching about ecological conversion by entrusting its bishops with this task along with ensuring that the Eucharist is worthily celebrated, that penance is practiced, that Christian initiation takes place, and that new vocations to serve God flourish. In this sense, John Paul II wrote: “There is a need for an *ecological conversion*, to which Bishops themselves can contribute by their teaching about the correct relationship of human beings with nature. Seen in the light of the doctrine of God the Father, the maker of heaven and earth, this relationship is one of ‘stewardship:’ human beings are set at the centre of creation as stewards of the Creator.”<sup>26</sup> The task of proclaiming this catechesis does not fall solely on the bishops; priests and deacons,<sup>27</sup> as well as select laypeople participate in this mission too.

There are two different dimensions to catechesis on reconciliation with creation. On the one hand, there is general pastoral work, to which all the faithful who belong to the Catholic Church are called. On the other hand, there is also specialized catechesis and care tailored to those who are particularly responsible for the created world because of their education or duties. Generally, this catechesis should include the Catholic Church’s official teachings on issues that are essential to life, which includes Church documents on ecology and bioethics. To this end, priests can speak about these issues in their homilies and catechesis, while tailoring the content to their parishioners’ professions. For example, in rural parishes, priests can influence parishioners’ sense of responsibility for the world that surrounds them by encouraging them to refrain from burning grass, limiting their use of pesticides to grow crops, and condemning poaching and the neglect of livestock. In urban environments, priests can make a greater effort to promote Franciscan spirituality and encourage the faithful to pay greater attention to the fact that the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment also involves the natural world when they prepare people to receive the Sacrament of Penance. In addition, social initiatives such as the First Day of Spring (March 21<sup>st</sup>), Earth Day (April 22<sup>nd</sup>), and World Environment Day (June 5<sup>th</sup>) could be included

<sup>25</sup> See RP, 26.

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Pastores Gregis*, 70.

<sup>27</sup> See *Christus Dominus*, 15; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1.



in the pastoral calendar, and priests can give homilies that promote reconciliation with creation on these days.<sup>28</sup>

In this context, it would be worthwhile for the Conference of Polish Bishops and other Christian communities within the Republic of Poland to prepare a joint document regarding the protection of the environment. Such a document can speak about basic theological issues regarding the creation of the world and practical ways to realize ecological conversion.<sup>29</sup>

Specialized ministry requires that concrete activities be carried out at all levels of church organization. For example, in the contemporary world it is necessary to organize at least ministries for veterinarians; those who work in the sciences and conduct research on animals; farmers, gardeners, beekeepers, and tourists on both national and diocesan levels. Symposia, conferences, and diocesan activities aimed at sensitizing these individuals to the need to care for nature should be organized in order to ensure the continual formation of these individuals.<sup>30</sup>

In Poland, the 2010 pastoral program “Let us care for life” was an ambitious goal that, unfortunately, was not met with enthusiasm or interest on the part of Polish clergy who often limit themselves to promoting only the Church’s teaching on the dignity and sanctity of human life.

## Celebrating the Sacraments

The ministry of reconciliation also includes the celebration of the sacraments, among which the Sacrament of the Eucharist has a special place. God permits creation to participate in his glory, which is conveyed throughout the entire world. Revised post-conciliar liturgical texts clearly emphasize this truth. According to the ancient maxim “*lex orandi–lex credendi*,” these texts uniquely express the faith professed by the community of the Church. The most important moment of the celebration of the Holy Mass, meaning the Eucharistic prayer, expresses the truth that all creation participates in the glory of the

<sup>28</sup> See J. Brusilo, *Otoczmy troską życie przyrody, roślin i zwierząt. Ekologiczny aspekt programu duszpasterskiego*, in *Otoczmy troską życie. Kościół niosący Ewangelię nadziei. Program duszpasterski Kościoła w Polsce na lata 2006-2010*, S. Stulkowski (ed.), Poznan 2008, pgs. 274-275.

<sup>29</sup> *Apel Kościołów w Polsce o ochronę stworzenia* –[http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/apel\\_16012013.html](http://www.opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/W/WE/kep/apel_16012013.html) (Accessed 11.10.2017).

<sup>30</sup> J. Brusilo, *Otoczmy troską życie przyrody, roślin i zwierząt...*, op. cit., pg. 274.



Triune God,<sup>31</sup> which will reach its fullness at the end of time.<sup>32</sup> The Sacrament of Confirmation bestows the gifts of the Holy Spirit and introduces the faithful into a mature Christian life. As such, it signifies and realizes ecological conversion as well as a readiness to take on responsibility for all of creation.<sup>33</sup>

Sacramentals are closely connected to the sacraments. The effectiveness of sacramentals results from the prayer of the Church.<sup>34</sup> The Rite of the Blessing of Animals, which has existed in the Roman Ritual for ages, emphasizes that many living beings participate in man's life, help him, give food, and also provide him with a certain consolation in accordance with God's providential plan.<sup>35</sup> When celebrating this rite, often on the feasts of St. Roch or St. Francis of Assisi, the Christian community not only invokes God's blessing on animals and their breeders and owners' prosperity, but it also primarily praises the Creator for his infinite wisdom and wonderful work of creation and redemption of the world. In this way, man learns to respect nature and joins with it in praising the Holy Trinity,<sup>36</sup> Who is the first recipient of blessing. This confirms the truth that the created world is part of the personal relationship that exists between God and man.<sup>37</sup>

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In order to achieve the reconciliation that the pastoral ministry of the Church promotes in the life of every believer, it is necessary to refer to each of its four dimensions. It is particularly important to consider reconciliation with creation and the ecological conversion that conditions it. Until now, this aspect has been neglected the most.

<sup>31</sup> See *The Roman Missal*, UCEL, 2010,\* Epiclesis III: "Father, you are holy indeed, and all creation rightly gives you praise."

<sup>32</sup> See Ibid, Eucharistic Prayer IV: "To all of us, your children, grant, O merciful Father, that we may enter into a heavenly inheritance [...] in your kingdom. There, with the whole of creation, freed from the corruption of sin and death, may we glorify you through Christ our Lord."

<sup>33</sup> See RP, 27.

<sup>34</sup> See *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 1166.

<sup>35</sup> See P. T. Weller, "Blessing of the Animals," in *Rituale Romanum*, Bruce Publishing Company, 1964. <https://www.sanctamissa.org/en/resources/books-1962/rituale-romanum/50-blessings-of-animals.html> (05.19.2018).

<sup>36</sup> See Ibid, pg. 316; K. Smykowski, *Eksperymenty medyczne z wykorzystaniem zwierząt. Studium teologicznomoralne*, Lublin 2017, pg. 139.

<sup>37</sup> See B. Nadolski, *Liturgika, Volume 3: Sakramenty, sakramentalia, błogosławieństwa*, Poznan 1992, pg. 246.

Although the teachings of the Church have frequently taken up these issues and lectured extensively on this topic, these pronouncements have not translated into pastoral activities that lead to reconciliation. For this reason, it is necessary for both the clergy and all of the laity who are at the heart of the fate of the created world to take up this pastoral ministry of reconciliation.

### „NAWRÓCENIE EKOLOGICZNE” I JEGO DUSZPASTERSTWO JAKO WARUNEK PRAWDZIWEGO POJEDNANIA

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie zagadnienia nawrócenia ekologicznego jako koniecznego warunku prawdziwego pojednania w świetle adhortacji apostolskiej *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* i innych wypowiedzi papieskich. Jest ono niezbędne, ponieważ grzech narusza także relację wobec świata stworzonego. Następnie została ukazana jego istota. Polega ono przede wszystkim na uznaniu prawdy o roli osoby ludzkiej w świecie oraz uwzględnieniu faktu ograniczonej ilości zasobów naturalnych. Kościół nie poprzestaje jednak na rozważaniach o charakterze teoretycznym. Pragnie bowiem prowadzić duszpasterstwo pojednania, w którym szczególną rolę odgrywają sakramenty, katecheza oraz dialog z różnymi poglądami i koncepcjami świata.

**Słowa kluczowe:** ekologia, nawrócenie, pojednanie, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*.

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