

MESSAGE FROM ARCHBISHOP CELESTINO MIGLIORE

On the 30th Anniversary of Pope John Paul II Visit to Iowa

“To all of you who are farmers and all who are associated with agricultural production I want to say this: the Church highly esteems your work.” – Pope John Paul II in Iowa

At the very outset I thank you for inviting me to attend this Commemoration of Pope John Paul II’s visit to Iowa thirty years ago. I fully share your pride for having a Pope honor with a visit, and special message and blessings the agricultural activity and heritage which characterize Iowa and rural America.

When visiting these places, Pope John Paul II did not indulge in agricultural poetry. He came to share with you your joys and satisfactions, as well as your struggles, hard moments and hard questions on many issues stemming from the ever-increasing progress of society and technology.



in the Trinity. But he never intended to set up either a political or social system. On the contrary, whenever his disciples urged him to take a political side, or when they wanted to proclaim him king, he always made it clear that he did not come to establish any new political, social or cultural system. He came to share his culture of love with as many women and men as possible so that they could change their hearts and minds, conform them to the values and ideals that he preached and lived, and to be the salt and light of the world. In turn, they would be able to discern and promote in all human institutions what is good, while being able to critique and change what is destructive and divisive.

John Paul II spoke to you not as a politician or an expert in agriculture and technology, but as a man of faith who tried to read the signs of the times in light of God’s wisdom. Not to give out recipes and solutions, but to shed light on different human situations and help people make sense of and find hope and the necessary resilience to confront new situations and events.

Christianity or Catholicism represents a faith, faith in God who is Triune – that is, whose specificity is the bond of love who links God the Father with Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus came on earth and lived among us to show us and allow us to share in the same culture of love that exists

Throughout our history, the Christian community had tried to do one thing: to implement the commandment left by Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you.” This simple principle was translated into what we call the seven corporal works of mercy: Feed the hungry, Give drink to the thirsty, Clothe the naked, Shelter the homeless, Visit the sick, Visit those in prison, Bury the dead. So, soon after the collapse of the Roman Empire, and well before the creation of the modern state administration, the seven corporal works of mercy inspired Christian communities to organize the very first hospitals, schools, universities, centers of agricultural education and formation,

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humanitarian and social institutions for orphans, destitute people, girls and women often neglected by society.

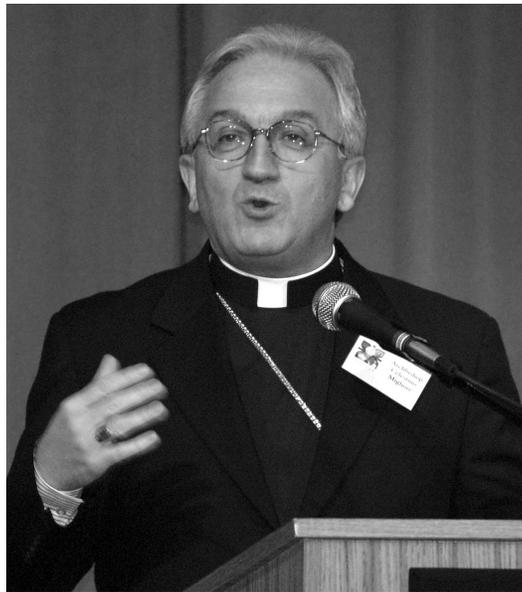
This specific commitment to and involvement in the works of mercy has provided the Church through the centuries with a unique perspective in dealing with social issues and also with a wealth of social thought and doctrine.

The Church shapes her social thought by carefully reflecting on the realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to interpret these realities, determining their conformity with or divergence from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation; its aim is thus to guide Christian behavior. It is precisely in this light that Pope Benedict XVI issued his recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth).

The various world crises that intertwined in the last months bring to the discussion presuppositions of thought and principles of individual, social and international behavior, which extend well beyond the financial or economic field. The idea of producing resources and assets (i.e., the economy) and strategically managing them (i.e., politics) without wanting together with the same actions, to carry out also the good (i.e., ethics) has been proven to be a naïve or cynical and fatal delusion.

Soil not Oil is the title of a recent book on agriculture in India. That is to say, it is the earth not petroleum that is the basis of our richness, the element in which we can entrust the survival of humanity. Only now we begin to look at human history in a new radical prospective regarding the past. For two centuries, from the beginning of the industrial revolution, there were things which man had not taken into account. Thanks to the power

conferred by technology and the use of fossil fuels (yesterday, carbon; today, petroleum), man has been able to use and abuse nature according to his will, without taking into account its ramifications, almost as if nature would never retaliate and present us with a hefty bill for our wrongdoings.



H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore | Photo by Lisa Bourne

Fossil fuels reveal themselves ever more as a parenthesis in human history, a parenthesis that is destined to close in the course of decades. The threads tied to this model of development begin to unravel; in terms of global warming, pollution, threats to biodiversity, and in thousands of other ways that should warn us that the current economic-financial crisis is only the tip of the iceberg.

The actual disasters are not indebted to science and technology as such – on the contrary, science and technology are the great gift of the Western world to human civilization – much so to the fact that science and technology have been taken over and put to the service of power and profit. Only this explains how science and technology, that should have and could have been sources of riches for humanity as a whole, in fact have enormously increased inequality at the world level, bringing famine to countries where it previously did not exist.

The substantial outcome of the bankruptcy of some excesses of the “green revolution,” as well as of the attempts by multinational food companies to patent seeds making farmers dependent, incite us to “return to the earth” in the sense of taking possession once again of the knowledge and wisdom of farming communities around the world, using modern technology and market to the extent that they can effectively be of help to the common good of humanity and not only for select speculators.

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Today we ask ourselves how the legacy of John Paul II’s visit lives on 30 years later. I had no way to go around and sound this out. But I was pleased to read in *The Des Moines Register* last Sunday nice stories that I’m going to quote: “After his soul-searching walk across his property, Tom Frantzen reached a turning point. At the time, his 350 acres were almost solely planted in corn. He began to rotate his crop, then in the 1980s began to eliminate pesticide and insecticide use. Today, he runs a 100 percent organic cattle and hog production. The long-term sustainability of this farm is woven into our values, he said. It all came from when the pope talked about ‘from generation to generation.’”

However, *The Des Moines Register* also reported that on a larger scale, the pope’s words don’t appear to have stuck. According to a local professor they interviewed, “in general we are a lot worse than in 1979 in terms of the environment. Iowans are doing a much better job protecting the soil since the pope’s message. But more work is ahead.”

Now, in the light of the social thought of the Church we can ask ourselves: what kind of moral authority is Pope Benedict, and with him the Catholic Church, exercising when it comes to all these current issues? For the moment I should limit myself to touching on only one crucial issue: the environment and climate change.

The personal commitment and numerous public appeals of Pope Benedict XVI have generated awareness campaigns for a renewed sense of respect for and the need to safeguard God’s creation. He has already earned the reputation of being the “green Pope.”

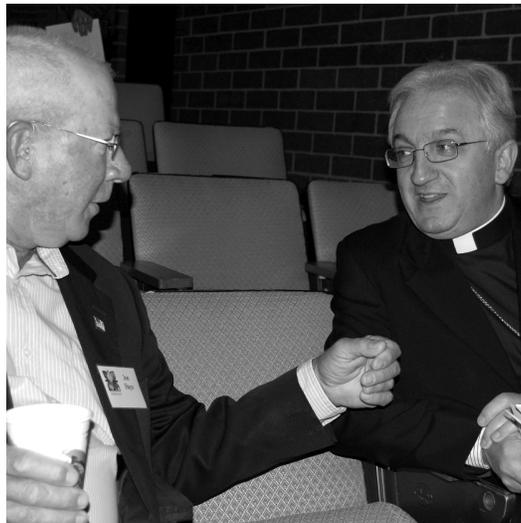
On numerous occasions, Pope Benedict has spoken of the “obedience to the voice of the earth” in as much as: “we must

respect the inner laws of creation, of this earth, we must learn these laws and obey these laws if we wish to survive. Our earth speaks to us and we must listen if we want to decipher its message. And if we must be obedient to the voice of the earth, this is even truer for the voice of human life. Not only must we care for the earth, we must respect the other, others: both the other as an individual person, as my neighbor, and others as communities who live in the world and have to live together.”

In his Encyclical *Charity in Truth*, Pope Benedict puts it in clear and challenging terms: how can we insist that future generations, our young people, respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves, to respect human life? It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties – those concerning environment, while trampling on the other – concerning human life.

In adopting ever more stringent norms to protect the environment and nature, it is often rightly affirmed that not all environmental activity should be allowed and sanctioned by law just because it is technically possible and economically profitable. Indiscriminate deforestation, the dumping of radioactive waste and invasive and devastating acts on nature are often more expedient and technically possible, but because they provoke our conscience as well as our responsibility towards creation, we come to the decision to invoke the principle that even though it is possible it should not be legally licit.

However, when passing from the ecological field to that of humans we have a tendency to affirm the opposite principle, namely, that all which is technically possible should be legally licit and consequently pursued. Whether it regards biotechnological engineering, the taking of human life or the structure of the family itself, we have the tendency to



Iowa Farmer Joe Hays with H.E. Archbishop Celestino Migliore | Photo by Lisa Bourne

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advocate that all which is technologically possible should also be legally licit. This inconsistency calls into question whether we truly place humans at the center of our decision-making.

If we wish to grasp where the Pope’s and Church’s discourse on environment or climate change makes a difference, we have to focus on the words they use. Very seldom do they speak of “environment.” Rather, they use the term “creation.” They don’t speak of “defending the environment,” but of “safeguarding” and protecting it. Thus, two important concepts: creation and to safeguard it.

When we speak of creation, we imply that there is a Creator. I do not intend to enter into the debate about creationism or evolution. In both cases, our faith tells us that not only the human being, but also creation, the cosmos, the environment, are a gift of God. The second creation account in the book of Genesis simply says: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (2:15).

The word “creation” puts everything in perspective and gives us a strong motivation. To care about the environment and cooperate to mitigate and adapt to climate change is not an option, not a luxury, not an extravagance, but a moral imperative.

It is commonly said that we have to defend the environment. Defense implies that there is an enemy. In this equation it’s too easy to identify the enemy as the human being. We prefer to speak of protection, or safeguard creation. Protecting the environment means more than defending it. Protecting the environment implies a more positive vision of the human being, in the sense that the person is not considered an enemy of or a threat to the environment, but one who holds oneself responsible for the care and management of the environment.

To safeguard creation means to rediscover the original plan of creation, the universal destination of goods. While we seek to find the best way to protect the environment and attain sustainable development, we must also work for justice within societies and among nations. We must consider

how in most countries today, it is the poor and the powerless who most directly bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Their efforts to eke out a bare existence perpetuate a vicious cycle of poverty and environmental degradation. Indeed, extreme want is not only the worst of all pollutions; it is also a great polluter.

The vocabulary in recent encyclicals and papal messages on the social thought of the Church, speaks of ecological conversion and repentance. A 2002 joint Declaration by John Paul II and the Greek Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I states: “What is required is an act of repentance on our part. A solution on the economic and technological level can only be found if we undergo in the most radical way an inner change of heart which can lead to a change in life-style and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production.”

The use of moral terminology, like “repentance” and “conversion,” should not lead anyone, much less those who devote themselves to seek and apply technical and legislative solutions, to dismiss the importance of this aspect. After all, the Catholic social doctrine defines common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, p.164).

The notion of “fulfillment” (the Latin speaks of “perfection”) introduces an important factor in the organization of civil society. It is not a mere matter of recognizing and composing rights, duties, interests of groups and individuals according to fair and democratic procedures. Nor is it a simple socio-economic well-being. But a matter of tending to a higher role model of society, where the “higher” stands for a link with the transcendent. ■



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