

# The concept and practice of sustainability for Europe



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Ecumenical Assembly held in Graz on "Reconciliation: Gift of God and Source of New Life". This is the first part of a summary of his keynote speech presented at the Dialogue Forum on 'Sustainable Europe' as a Challenge to Socio-Political Action of European Christians. The second and final part will be carried next week.

AT THE PRESENT juncture of human history, two tendencies of global proportions can be observed: on the one hand, spectacular advances in scientific technology, medicine and communications have opened immense possibilities for enriching the quality of human life; on the other hand, there is a growing consensus that the dominant economic system is impoverishing a vast number of people.

Through the depletion of the ozone layer, extensive soil erosion, the extinction of species and global warming, current economic patterns threaten the regenerative capacity of the biosphere. European countries are in more than one sense the source of this problem. The pattern of production and consumption practised in Western Europe is a major contributing factor to both regional and international disorder and conflict. Discourse about ecological responsibility has therefore a special relevance to the European continent.

When speaking about the urgency of change, Europe must take a leading role to implement this change. The resources of the earth which God destined to all humankind, are not distributed justly, for the West European industrialised countries are consuming a great share of these resources. This injustice must be redressed for the benefit of all present and future generations!

## Churches must not remain silent

What impact will Christian faith exert within the hearts and psyche of the 'new Europeans'? When discerning our vocation as Christians in building a new Europe, we have to confront the challenge of the ecological crisis in the light of the Scriptures and identify the criteria which ought to guide our response. We have to read correctly the signs of our times.

The credibility of our message in Europe and beyond depends on our churches' ability to offer a vision out of the deep sources of our traditions, and to indicate alternative lifestyles. Churches must become a living witness of these alternative lifestyles! The churches' mission is to present a vision for sustainable development which unites economic, social and environmental spheres, and bring a much needed spiritual dimension to the ecological crisis.

Churches must not remain silent and indifferent. On the contrary, they have a vital role as partners in dialogue with politicians to address the key issues of our times. The social and political challenge of European Christians is to join European institutions in the search for a viable model for sustainable development.

The Graz Ecumenical Assembly is a 'divine kairos' for Christian churches, bearing grace, tidings and appeals from God to give a soul to the emerging 'new Europe'. The challenge of the churches' 'new evangelisation' for Europe is not a project aiming at the 'restoration' of the Europe of the past. Evangelisation must reach not just individuals but cultures as well. Indeed, the new evangelisation reveals the relationship existing between the Gospel and today's culture of consumerism.

The urgency of this mission has seeped unfortunately very slowly in our churches' consciousness and conscientiousness. The irrationality which characterises today's ecological situation in Europe was for decades only slightly recognised by the churches; the commitment of many Christians for the conservation of creation was only their second or third priority. However, the churches' awareness of the ecological crisis lately has increased considerably. In fact, more and more church-related organisations have become involved in

the ecological movement. Many churches have done important studies and are engaged in stimulating Christians to respond positively to their responsibility towards creation.

Will the Graz Assembly bring about the final change? Is a common commitment possible to give a common witness? Two years ago an attempt was made in this direction. Under the patronage of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Council of European Bishops' Conference (CCEE) an ecumenical meeting on 'Environment and Development' was convened at the Orthodox Academy near Chania in Crete.

The consultation meeting brought together representatives from all Europe to exchange ideas and share their commitment in the field of the environment. This assembly reveals that many churches are taking important initiatives. Another consultation meeting was convened at the National Park of Circeo, Sabaudia, Italy, for the churches and their organisations in southern Europe. I was present for both occasions.

What follows is inspired mainly by the reflections and conclusions contained in the final reports of these two consultations both of which focus on the responsibility of the European churches to give credible witness in ecological issues.

## Implications

The Brundtland Report and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992) have helped to draw the world's attention to sustainable development. At the Crete and Circeo consultation meetings, participants emphasised the importance for European Christians not only to recognise the magnitude and complexity of the ecological challenge, but also to resist in their social and political action the temptation to discount the problem by excluding from consideration certain dimensions implied in the concept of sustainable development. It is therefore the task of the churches to inspire their members by removing the smokescreens which blur the concept of sustainability. The following is an attempt to highlight four important aspects without which the concept of 'sustainability' would be incomplete:

a) When assessing how sustainable a particular mode of development might be, it is necessary to take seriously into account the probability of risks it might pose in future. Technological development has altered the nature of human action which can now, more than ever before, have consequences which extend far in space and time. There can be no sustainability unless risks are conscientiously calculated and avoided. Responsibility is the fruit of foresight. Therefore, risks need to be analysed by considering the following steps: taking into consideration all the possible consequences of our actions, or lack of action; the possible scale on which such consequences could occur; the probability that such consequences might actually occur. It is often the case that avoiding one set of risks involves accepting - or even seeking - others.

Given the complex world we live in today, opting for one specific strategy in one particular segment of the economy may well entail serious risks in different sectors. In avoiding such risks a set of guiding principles may be applied, among which the following are most evident:

i) the best evidence principle. This means that we should obtain the best evidence before weighing up what action to take to remedy an environmental problem, especially if large resources are likely to be involved.

ii) the precautionary principle. This recognises that there are limits to how

far we can expect 'best evidence'. We still need to understand much about the effects of human activity on the environment. Where a threat to the environment is serious and imminent, we cannot afford to wait for a higher degree of proof before acting to prevent damage. Thus for global warming, although the correlation of atmospheric emissions and climate change still awaits confirmation, because by the time we do so, much serious damage will have been done.

Europe reaches sustainability when its countries remain as rich in resources and opportunities for future generations as were inherited from the past. In practice, this means that renewable resources are consumed no faster than they can be renewed, that non-renewable resources are consumed no faster than renewable substitutes can be found, that wastes are discharged at a rate no greater than they can be proceeded by nature and human devices. This aspect concerning our responsibilities for future generations is a central point for Europe. Europe cannot be concerned only with its own destiny, nor care only for its own future. It is not a matter of a future for Europe, but rather about the role of Europe for the future world.

b) For the churches, sustainability is inseparably linked with a renewed call to justice and peace. Our ecological responsibility demands a strong commitment to justice and peace in a sustainable society. The world is entrenched in a deadly form of injustice. While a few inhabitants of the world enjoy unprecedented affluence and power, millions languish in crushing poverty, hunger and oppression. Sustainability presupposes willingness to share the gifts of creation within the limits imposed by humanity. Churches are called to be the voice of the voiceless and to be the advo-

## Some human activities already exceed the limits of the earth's carrying capacity

cate of the powerless who are suffering from poverty and exploitation. International justice demands that the fundamental needs of all must be met. Intergenerational justice inspires our churches to be concerned for the life of future generations: they should inherit a planet whose resources allow them to develop and enjoy life with dignity.

## Violence against creation

There will be neither peace nor justice if not within a creation respected for itself by everyone. It is therefore imperative that Christians and the churches recover the meaning of sin by rendering it more comprehensive and by identifying also as sin every offence against the creation of God. Violence towards creation is a sin against God. St Ambrose (c. 337-397), bishop of Milan, referred long ago to 'injuries done to nature'. Together with the apostle Paul we can affirm that the creation groans because of the grave forms of violence done to it.

Violence is exercised by human beings on creation through wastage and the lack of respect for its resources. This leads to the extinction of many species of animals and plants, the reduction of genetic diversity, destruction of habitat, and the permanent pollution of many rivers, lakes, seas.

Sustainability presupposes peace and at the same time conditions it. Conflicts and wars represent an acute danger not only to human life but also to the integrity of the environment; they must therefore be avoided on this

ground. Old differences and long-standing ethnic and cultural rivalries, which for many decades were dormant, are now resurfacing with a vengeance. The resurgent nationalism is becoming a serious threat for Europe's stability and peace. It is evident that violence - present or potential - remains a critical issue in the Mediterranean and in Europe. For all those devoted to peace, justice and integrity of creation, solidarity and reconciliation are essential and urgent imperatives for all.

These present negative energies in Europe have to be checked by the establishment of a true culture and a true pedagogy of peace. In some European regions, one gets the impression that people are cohabiting rather than cooperating. Non-violent means should be sought for preventing and resolving conflicts. As to the positive side, we can perceive powerful dynamics of peace and reconciliation in many places, thanks to the commitment of many persons and institutions, including churches.

c) There can be no justice and peace without radical changes. In place of the present growth-oriented, throwaway pattern of consumption, new models are required. It has become more and more clear that there are limits to human expansion on planet Earth. There is mounting evidence that some human activities already exceed the limits of the earth's carrying capacity. The concept of 'environmental space' has already gained ground.

Environmental space is the total quantity of energy, non-renewable resources, agriculture land and forests that we can use globally without impinging on the access of future generations to the same amount. Each person in the world has the right (but not obligation) to use an equal amount of environmental space in term of global resources.

Given the limited 'environmental space' available to Europe, it is evident that sustainability in each European country cannot be reached without a radical change. The crisis cannot be solved simply by a new orientation of society. Those who are committed to ecological movements are correct in claiming that what we need is not a matter of correcting but rather of altering radically the current course of events.

The roots of the ecological crisis is the consumption-greed in the so-called developed world. In 1970, the 20% rich of the world's population used 73.9% of the global resources. In 1989 this had increased to 82.7%. The 20% of the very poorest have 1.4% of the total resources at their disposal. It is not the law of nature that it should be this way. We cannot claim that we do not know these facts. We do know, and the churches are called to be a prophetic voice in our Western world.

Sustainable development cannot be realised without a radical change of direction. When terms like 'sustainable growth' or 'sustainable development' are used, often the assumption is made that the present course of society can essentially be maintained. We understand sustainable growth to be a contradiction in terms. Human demands on creation must not grow, but be reduced. Wherever possible Christians may join forces with people of other religions and other philosophical persuasions and seek to build up the consensus which is needed for change.

A major shift in patterns of production and consumption is called for, beginning with the wealthy nations. The dominant 'development' model

is called into question as economically and environmentally unsustainable, morally unjust, and spiritually debilitating. In view of the principle of sustainable future which requires an equitable sharing of resources, the countries of Western Europe must assume a special responsibility for making changes in their patterns and levels of growth and consumption.

Each European country must first quantify the current state of their environmental space. It is imperative that each country becomes aware, for instance, that it has a limited amount of agricultural land that must be used sustainably; that it has a limit to CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; and that it has a finite amount of non-renewable resources. European countries must strive to reach sustainability within one generation. The year 2010 is considered as far away enough to redistribute most categories of the environmental space to a large extent. Central and Eastern countries need also to act urgently to address their serious pollution problems. A society that takes seriously into account the limits set by God, distinguishes itself from a society that is inspired by consumerism, as many Europeans are living nowadays. The future of Europe will be better off with our altered behaviour to consumerism.

## Vested interests

Vested interests in industrialised society are powerful and are too often firmly opposed to enlightened voices calling for protection of the environment and the ecosystem. Because of the determined effort to undermine the seriousness of problems still arising from ecological irresponsibility in industry, the churches must be resolute in their determination to play a prophetic role in defence of the integrity of creation and against injustice.

d) Sustainable development in Europe cannot be reached unless we set limits to technological efficiency. The shrinking of resources indicate that technology must be kept within limits. Energy is one of the cornerstones of the European economy. But it also causes some of the heaviest damages to the environment in Europe, especially global warming. Europe is using far too much energy per capita and has a far greater dependence on fossil fuels. If Europe's energy consumption were made global, catastrophic environmental damage would ensue.

The problem of road and air transport and mobility has emerged as one of the central issues in sustainable development for Europe. Environmental reports indicate that the European transportation system needs a fundamental reorientation from its current unsustainable policy. Some claim that the 'polluter pays' policy needs to be applied seriously. Moreover, energy consumption must be reduced in order to mitigate the effects of global warming. The industrialised countries are causing the majority of these emissions. Since developing countries are aspiring for further development, developing nations are expected to significantly increase their emissions over the next decades.

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# Rediscovering asceticism

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The ecological crisis confronts the churches with a central message of the Christian tradition. For hundreds of years asceticism was a self-evident attitude against consumerism. This tradition has been lost during the last years of development. Is it not perhaps the responsibility of the churches in Europe to rediscover the meaning of asceticism in today's culture? We need to change our lifestyle. The urgent need for reconciliation between industrialised and developing countries, between rich and poor within each country, and also between humankind and God's creation as a whole, impels the churches to encourage Christians to rethink their very lifestyle. A sustainable society requires sustainable

lifestyles.

Churches should not only emphasise the urgency of adopting a lifestyle inspired by simplicity of life and sobriety, and the rejection of a consumerist mentality, but they must also be a credible witness. Churches ought to be good examples in practising a sustainable lifestyle which reflects the wholeness and holiness of creation. We must rediscover that it is life which renders precious what we possess, and not our possessions which make life precious. In other words, we must rediscover poverty (in the sense of sobriety) as a positive and liberating challenge and as an opportunity through the recovery of the meaning of fasting, asceticism, the Sabbath rest and the Jubilee year.

(To be concluded)

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