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Benedict issues forceful environmental message

by John L. Allen Jr.



Pope Benedict XVI greets people gathered for his Angelus prayer from the window of his apartment overlooking St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Dec. 13. The square was packed with children and families who brought their figurines of baby Jesus to be blessed by the pope. (CNS/Paul Haring)

Benedict XVI has already earned a reputation as the "green pope" because of his repeated calls for stronger environmental protection, as well as gestures such as installing solar panels atop a Vatican audience hall and signing an agreement to make the Vatican Europe's first carbon-neutral state. Now he's cemented that profile by issuing his most comprehensive document on environmental ethics to date, in the form of an annual message for the World Day of Peace.

Strikingly, the document appeared as the nations of the world were meeting in Copenhagen to hammer out a deal on climate change — one of a host of environmental threats Benedict identified as an urgent moral priority.

The pope's language was forceful.

How can one remain indifferent in the face of problems such as climate change, desertification, the

degradation and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase in extreme weather, and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical areas?? he asked.

?How can one overlook the growing phenomenon of so-called ?environmental refugees,? meaning persons who, because of environmental degradation, have to leave ? often together with their belongings ? in a kind of forced movement, in order to escape the risks and the unknown? How can we not react to the conflicts already underway, as well as potential new ones, linked to access to natural resources??

?These are all questions,? Benedict XVI said, ?that have a profound impact on the exercise of human rights, such as the rights to life, to food, to health and to development.?

The World Day of Peace is an observance launched by the Catholic church under Pope Paul VI in 1967. The day is actually marked on Jan. 1, but the Vatican released Benedict?s message Dec. 15.

Full text of Pope Benedict's World Peace Day message:

Benedict?s title was ?If you want to cultivate peace, take care of creation? ? a deliberate play on Paul VI?s famous injunction, ?If you want peace, work for justice.?

Benedict accented a vision of the cosmos as a gift of God, which human beings have an obligation to ?care for and cultivate.? In that regard, the pope called for ?a profound and farsighted revision of the model of development,? based not only on the needs of today?s ?living beings, human and non-human,? but those of generations to come.

At the level of specific policy measures, Benedict XVI advocated:

- A new mode of calculating the cost of economic activity, which would factor in environmental impact;
- Greater investment in solar energy and other forms of energy with a reduced environmental footprint;
- Strategies of rural development concentrated on small-scale farmers and their families;
- Progressive disarmament, including ?a world free of nuclear weapons.?

While saying that primary responsibility for taking action must fall to wealthy industrialized nations, Benedict pointedly added that less developed nations ?cannot be exonerated from their own responsibility.? Exactly how much less developed nations should be expected to curb emissions, and to take other steps potentially limiting their economic growth, has been a major sticking point at the Copenhagen summit.

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At the same time, Benedict XVI wasn?t simply issuing a set of political talking points. He also insisted that protecting the environment is ?the duty of every person,? one which demands changes in personal habits and attitudes.

Benedict called for "new styles of life," based not solely upon the logic of consumption but also "sobriety and solidarity," as well as "prudence."

Benedict linked environmental protection to other core values, such as the right to life "in every phase and in every condition," and the family. He cautioned against a "new pantheism with neo-pagan accents" that would elevate nature into an absolute value, at the expense of human dignity.

Benedict's 2010 World Peace Day message builds upon what many experts already regarded as the most striking element of his social teaching. His track record on ecology is extensive enough that Catholic writer Woodene Koenig-Bricker collected it into a book in May 2009, titled *Ten Commandments for the Environment* (Ave Maria Press.)

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