

## COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 56

### **Human Work – The duty to cultivate and care for the earth**

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God the Creator with absolute power, created the earth and gave human beings the responsibility to not only look after it, but to conquer it. “The Old Testament presents God as the omnipotent Creator (cf Gen 2:2; Job 38-41; Ps 147) who fashions man in his image and invites him to work the soil (cf Gen 2:5-6), and cultivate and care for the Garden of Eden in which he has placed him (cf Gen 2:15). To the first human couple God entrusts the task of subduing the earth and exercising dominion over every living creature (cf. Gen 1:28).”

Until comparatively recently, the human transformation of the environment was considered a necessary and creative activity. It was felt that human beings could use the fruits of the earth to improve human condition, as well as “develop” or “transform” the physical environment.

Plants and animals were domesticated for agricultural production, irrigation and drainage systems were developed to assist in flood control. These interventions by people were viewed as having a positive impact on both the environment and human condition.

The *Compendium* tells us that the “dominion exercised by man over other living creatures, however, is not to be despotic or reckless; on the contrary he is to ‘cultivate and care for’ (Gen 2:15) the goods created by God.

These goods were not created by man, but have been received by him as a precious gift that the Creator has placed under his responsibility. Cultivating the earth means not abandoning it to itself; exercising dominion over it means taking care of it, as a wise king cares for his people and a shepherd his sheep”.

So, while God has given us dominion over the earth, we are to treat the earth as a gift from God. It is to be appreciated and cared for, just as we appreciate and take good care of gifts that loved ones or people we care about greatly, give us. What does this mean? We cannot exploit the fruits of the earth without regard for the impact on the environment.

We must be mindful, that the way we use the earth’s physical environment can impact on its future ability to regenerate itself and bear fruit for future generations. It is therefore not all right for people to use the environment in a way that causes animals to become scarce or extinct, causes the trees in the forest to be used faster than they can be replaced, causes the weather patterns to change increasing the risk and magnitude of natural disasters, or causing the increased pollution of the air and water sources.

“In the Creator’s plan, created realities, which are good in themselves, exist for man’s use. The wonder of the mystery of man’s grandeur makes the psalmist exclaim: ‘*What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than*

*God, and crown him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet' (Ps 8:5-7)."*

What happens however, when we break this trust that God has given us to cultivate and care for creation – his gift to us? "Work is part of the original state of man and precedes his fall; it is therefore not a punishment or curse.

It becomes toil and pain because of the sin of Adam and Eve, who break their relations of trust and harmony with God (cf Gen 3:6-8). The prohibition to eat '*of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*' (Gen 2:17) reminds man that he has received everything as a gift and that he continues to be a creature and not the Creator. It was precisely this temptation that prompted the sin of Adam and Eve: '*you will be like God*' (Gen 3:5).

They wanted absolute dominion over all things, without having to submit to the will of the Creator. From that moment, the soil becomes miserly, unrewarding, sordidly hostile (cf Gen 4:12); only by the sweat of one's brow will it be possible to reap its fruit (cf. Gen 3:17, 19)."

We must be always mindful that while God has given us authority over the earth, he is the Omnipotent Creator, and we only creatures. We must respect his will and understand that we do not have absolute dominion over all things.

"Notwithstanding the sin of our progenitors, however, the Creator's plan, the meaning of His creatures – and among these, man, who is called to cultivate and care for creation – remain unaltered."

What we must do is behave responsibly in our command of the resources that God has given to us. In a practical sense, we must seek to understand how our use of resources impact on the environment in the long term, seek to address environmental issues at the family level, community level and national level through working with each other, community organisations and governments.