

# Faith and the Call for a Human Ecology

By Fr. Michael Czerny



*The following remarks are adapted from a keynote speech given by Fr. Michael Czerny, SJ, the Chief of Staff of the President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. The speech was given on behalf of Cardinal Peter Turkson:*

**O**ur human bond with the earth is absolutely foundational. In the second Genesis account, we learn that “Adam” comes from *adamah* or ground, earth. So too, “human” is grounded in *humus*, soil. Humanity was not created *ex nihilo* but *ex adamah* and *humus*. Without earth, there is no human being.

Moreover, our human story begins in a garden, not the wilds. And it involves more than the inexorable laws of nature. Humanity is the factor that opens the earth up to new possibilities and realizations. Are they new harmonies or new imbalances? The outcome depends on our actions.

When we care for the earth or misuse it, we care for ourselves or abuse ourselves. Because we are earth, and we are sent forth as gardeners: our nature is to consciously work the soil, work on and within the ground from which God made us.

So there is a duality in the idea of “human ecology.” On the one hand, we know ourselves as God’s stewards of the earth. When we exercise stewardship or caring

in the style of God, when we act in the name of God the Creator and in his image, we must adopt his style of love and communion. We cannot divorce ourselves from our instruments, so wonderfully fashioned by science and commerce. If machines and chemicals and investment strategies are hurting nature, we cannot wash our hands – it is we who introduced them into the garden.

Simultaneously, protecting creation means protecting something of which every human is a part. We are all creatures, we are nature, and we share the destiny of created nature. When we care for the environment, we care for life in general and thus for human life. And when our interventions in nature lead to changes in nature, these changes do not occur in some inert matter distant from us. We are changing ourselves, too. The authentic wholeness, the integral self of every woman and man, is bound up in whatever we do in our natural environment.

So here’s the connection with human ecology. The way men and women treat the environment reflects how we think about and treat ourselves – and vice versa. Respect for human ecology lays down the limits and perspectives of development. The environment cannot be considered more important than humanity nor as just a warehouse of raw materials. Not to recognize and not to respect our full, integral reality is to poison the human environment at the same time as we poison the air and the water too.

Our faith calls us to this understanding of ourselves and our place in nature. For too long, we have allowed the colossal power of science, engineering and commerce to separate us from nature and treat it instrumentally. Thank you for listening to the call of faith. With prayer, with loving concern for all humanity and with the best that science and commerce have to offer, let us roll up our sleeves and return to the garden.

