

THE CORNWALL DECLARATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

The past millennium brought unprecedented improvements in human health, nutrition, and life expectancy, especially among those most blessed by political and economic liberty and advances in science and technology. At the dawn of a new millennium, the opportunity exists to build on these advances and to extend them to more of the earth's people.

At the same time, many are concerned that liberty, science, and technology are more a threat to the environment than a blessing to humanity and nature. Out of shared reverence for God and His creation and love for our neighbors, we Jews, Catholics, and Protestants, speaking for ourselves and not officially on behalf of our respective communities, joined by others of good will, and committed to justice and compassion, unite in this declaration of our common concerns, beliefs, and aspirations.

– Our Concerns –

Human understanding and control of natural processes empower people not only to improve the human condition but also to do great harm to each other, to the earth, and to other creatures. As concerns about the environment have grown in recent decades, the moral necessity of ecological stewardship has become increasingly clear.

At the same time, however, certain misconceptions about nature and science, coupled with erroneous theological and anthropological positions, impede the advancement of a sound environmental ethic. In the midst of controversy over such matters, it is critically important to remember that while passion may energize environmental activism, it is reason—including sound theology and sound science—that must guide the decision-making process. We identify three areas of common misunderstanding:

1. Many people mistakenly view humans as principally consumers and polluters rather than producers and stewards. Consequently, they ignore our potential, as bearers of God's image, to add to the earth's abundance. The increasing realization of this potential has enabled people in societies blessed with an advanced economy not only to reduce pollution, while producing more of the goods and services responsible for the great improvements in the human condition, but also to alleviate the negative effects of much past pollution. A clean environment is a costly good; consequently, growing affluence, technological innovation, and the application of human and material capital are integral to environmental improvement. The tendency among some to oppose economic progress in the name of environmental stewardship is often sadly self-defeating.
2. Many people believe that "nature knows best," or that the earth—untouched by human hands—is the ideal. Such romanticism leads some to deify nature or oppose human dominion over creation. Our position, informed by revelation and confirmed by reason and experience, views human stewardship that unlocks the potential in creation for all the earth's inhabitants as good. Humanity alone of all the created order is capable of developing other resources and can thus enrich creation, so it can properly be said that the human person is the most valuable resource on earth. Human life, therefore, must be cherished and allowed to flourish. The alternative—denying the possibility of beneficial human management of the earth—removes all rationale for environmental stewardship.
3. While some environmental concerns are well founded and serious, others are without foundation or greatly exaggerated. Some well-founded concerns focus on human health problems in the developing world arising from inadequate sanitation, widespread use of primitive biomass fuels like wood and dung, and primitive agricultural, industrial, and commercial practices; distorted resource consumption patterns driven by perverse economic incentives; and improper disposal of nuclear and other hazardous wastes in nations lacking adequate regulatory and legal safeguards. Some unfounded or undue concerns include fears of destructive man-made global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss.

The real and merely alleged problems differ in the following ways:

1. The former are proven and well understood, while the latter tend to be speculative.
2. The former are often localized, while the latter are said to be global and cataclysmic in scope.
3. The former are of concern to people in developing nations especially, while the latter are of concern mainly to environmentalists in wealthy nations.
4. The former are of high and firmly established risk to human life and health, while the latter are of very low and largely hypothetical risk.
5. Solutions proposed to the former are cost effective and maintain proven benefit, while solutions to the latter are unjustifiably costly and of dubious benefit.

Public policies to combat exaggerated risks can dangerously delay or reverse the economic development necessary to improve not only human life but also human stewardship of the environment. The poor, who are most often citizens of developing nations, are often forced to suffer longer in poverty with its attendant high rates of malnutrition, disease, and mortality; as a consequence, they are often the most injured by such misguided, though well-intended, policies.

– Our Beliefs –

Our common Judeo-Christian heritage teaches that the following theological and anthropological principles are the foundation of environmental stewardship:

1. God, the Creator of all things, rules over all and deserves our worship and adoration.
2. The earth, and with it all the cosmos, reveals its Creator's wisdom and is sustained and governed by His power and lovingkindness.
3. Men and women were created in the image of God, given a privileged place among creatures, and commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth. Human persons are moral agents for whom freedom is an essential condition of responsible action. Sound environmental stewardship must attend both to the demands of human well being and to a divine call for human beings to exercise caring dominion over the earth. It affirms that human well being and the integrity of creation are not only compatible but also dynamically interdependent realities.
4. God's Law—summarized in the Decalogue and the two Great Commandments (to love God and neighbor), which are written on the human heart, thus revealing His own righteous character to the human person—represents God's design for shalom, or peace, and is the supreme rule of all conduct, for which personal or social prejudices must not be substituted.
5. By disobeying God's Law, humankind brought on itself moral and physical corruption as well as divine condemnation in the form of a curse on the earth. Since the fall into sin people have often ignored their Creator, harmed their neighbors, and defiled the good creation.
6. God in His mercy has not abandoned sinful people or the created order but has acted throughout history to restore men and women to fellowship with Him and through their stewardship to enhance the beauty and fertility of the earth.
7. Human beings are called to be fruitful, to bring forth good things from the earth, to join with God in making provision for our temporal well being, and to enhance the beauty and fruitfulness of the rest of the earth. Our call to fruitfulness, therefore, is not contrary to but mutually complementary with our call to steward God's gifts. This call implies a serious commitment to fostering the intellectual, moral, and religious habits and practices needed for free economies and genuine care for the environment.

– Our Aspirations –

In light of these beliefs and concerns, we declare the following principled aspirations:

1. We aspire to a world in which human beings care wisely and humbly for all creatures, first and foremost for their fellow human beings, recognizing their proper place in the created order.
2. We aspire to a world in which objective moral principles—not personal prejudices—guide moral action.
3. We aspire to a world in which right reason (including sound theology and the careful use of scientific methods) guides the stewardship of human and ecological relationships.
4. We aspire to a world in which liberty as a condition of moral action is preferred over government-initiated management of the environment as a means to common goals.
5. We aspire to a world in which the relationships between stewardship and private property are fully appreciated, allowing people's natural incentive to care for their own property to reduce the need for collective ownership and control of resources and enterprises, and in which collective action, when deemed necessary, takes place at the most local level possible.
6. We aspire to a world in which widespread economic freedom—which is integral to private, market economies—makes sound ecological stewardship available to ever greater numbers.
7. We aspire to a world in which advancements in agriculture, industry, and commerce not only minimize pollution and transform most waste products into efficiently used resources but also improve the material conditions of life for people everywhere.