



Address to the Working Group on the Subject 'Chemical Hazards in Developing Countries'



John Paul II stresses the harmful effects of chemical pollution especially in developing countries. Peoples and nations must be moved by solidarity in their relations with each other. Thus developing countries have a high moral duty 'to assist the developing countries in their efforts to solve their chemical pollution and health hazard problems'. The international community should act to defend and promote the environment at a time when the balance of ecosystems is of great importance for the future of 'human survival and well-being'. This constitutes part of the Christian's duty to respect the work of God.

Distinguished Men and Women of Science,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. It gives me great pleasure to meet you, participants in the workshop on 'Chemical Hazards in Developing Countries' organised by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in conjunction with the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, and with the support of the Swedish Wenner-Gren Foundation. The very enunciation of the subject of your meeting highlights the importance and timeliness of your reflections. Who cannot but be deeply concerned by the prospect of the already existing and ever expanding danger from pollution and other side effects of the production and use of chemicals? Indeed, your discussions, reflecting the highest levels of scientific competence, will be of great relevance to the growing public concern about the environment. I am confident that the publication of your studies and proposals will be of interest to the appropriate agencies and to governments, both in industrialised and in developing countries.

2. In most industrialised countries, attention is paid to the risks to human beings and to the environment from man-made chemicals. In some countries regulations are in place. But in developing countries, where most chemical hazards have their origin in the import of chemical substances and technologies, a lack of expertise and of necessary infrastructures often renders efficient control difficult or impossible. Very few countries, in fact, have a specific legislation regulating the handling and use of toxic chemicals. Other problems in developing countries concern the introduction of highly polluting industries, not subject to the more rigorous control that is applied in developed countries. It is a serious abuse and an offence against human solidarity when industrial enterprises in the richer countries profit from the economic and legislative weakness of poorer countries to locate production plants or accumulate waste which will have a degrading effect on the environment and on people's health.

The answer, certainly, is not to deny developing countries the imports and technologies they need, especially when these have to do with food production and the setting up of basic industries: 'Peoples or nations too have a right to their full development'.¹ In fact, development, which ensures the conditions required for the exercise of fundamental rights, belongs to the domain of universal human rights. It is a direct consequence of the universal destination of the goods of creation.

3. Although primarily scientific and technical, your workshop is not without great interest also for the Church: not in the sense that the Church has any particular scientific competence in the field, but in the sense that what is in question cannot be divorced from the ethical and moral character of the development which has given rise to this problem.

A fundamental principle of the Church's approach to development is expressed succinctly in the words of my predecessor Pope Paul VI: 'Development cannot be limited to mere economic growth. In order to be authentic, it must be complete: integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every person and of the whole person'.² This does not mean that the Christian holds a negative view of the greater availability of material goods and the spreading of those industries which produce them. It means – as I have written elsewhere – that 'development cannot consist only in the use, dominion over and indiscriminate possession of created things and the products of human industry, but rather in subordinating the possession, dominion and the use to man's divine likeness and to his vocation to immortality'.³

Man's spiritual nature and his transcendent vocation imply a fundamental solidarity between people, whereby we are all responsible for each other. Respect for the natural environment and the correct and moderated use of the resources of creation are a part of each individual's moral obligations towards others. This truth applies also to relations between peoples and nations. In this context the technical dimension of the subject of your discussions is inseparable from its moral aspects. It would be difficult to overstate the weight of the moral duty incumbent on developing countries to assist the developing countries in their efforts to solve their chemical pollution and health hazard problems.

4. The international community, for its part, should continue to promote global agreements

regarding the production, trade and handling of hazardous substances. In the 1990 World Day of Peace Message I wrote that, 'the concepts of an ordered universe and a common heritage both point to the necessity of a more internationally coordinated approach to the management of the earth's goods'.⁴ Specifically in relation to the environment, I noted that 'the right to a safe environment is ever more insistently presented today as a right that must be included in an updated Charter of Human Rights'.⁵ The 1992 United Nations Environmental Conference in Rio de Janeiro took steps in this regard, and in Chapter 19 of Agenda 21 several actions, which are especially relevant to developing regions, are recommended. The Holy See gladly agrees with the proposal in Agenda 21 that recommends the setting up of an International Forum on Chemical Safety, with the purpose of giving developing countries assistance to increase their competence and capacity in this field.

5. The human family is at a cross-roads in its relationship to the natural environment. Not only is it necessary to increase efforts to educate in a keen awareness of solidarity and interdependence among the world's peoples. It is also necessary to insist on the interdependence of the various ecosystems and on the importance of the balance of these systems for human survival and well-being. Mere utilitarian considerations or an aesthetic approach to nature cannot be a sufficient basis for a genuine education in ecology. We must all learn to approach the environmental question with solid ethical convictions involving responsibility, self-control, justice and fraternal love.

For believers, this outlook springs directly from their relationship to God the Creator of all that exists. For Christians, respect for God's handiwork is reinforced by their certain hope of the restoration of all things in Jesus Christ, in whom 'all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross'.⁶

6. Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish to encourage you in your commitment. I pray that your workshop will be successful in suggesting guidelines for controlling the problem of chemical pollution and consequent health hazards in developing countries, and that it will offer valid recommendations for the protection of the environment, the food chain and human health in different parts of the world. Upon all of you I invoke abundant divine blessings.

1 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 32.

2 *Populorum Progressio*, n. 14.

3 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 29.

4 N. 9.

5 John Paul II, *1990 World Day of Peace Message*, n. 9.

© Fri Jun 06 16:38:38 CEST 2025 - The Pontifical Academy of Sciences