

Code: ZE02083101

Date: 2002-08-31

The 8 Great Worries of the World, as Seen by John Paul II

Attacks on Life, Family, Environment Among the Concerns

VATICAN CITY, AUG. 31, 2002 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- John Paul II believes that nations and leaders must face eight key challenges if a more-just world is to be achieved. And the eight have a common denominator: to put every man and woman at the center of development.

Reflecting on the world scene, with all its hopes and horrors, the Pope last Jan. 10 presented to the ambassadors of countries accredited to the Vatican the eight great challenges as he sees them.

Below are the challenges, as presented by the Pope, along with some of his earlier statements and those of his representatives in U.N. forums.

1. Protection of human life

According to John Paul II, the first challenge facing the world is "the defense of the sacredness of human life in all circumstances, especially in relation to the challenges posed by genetic manipulation."

His emphasis on "all circumstances" reminds one of past debates among Catholics. Some pro-life groups, concerned with the protection of human life in its earliest stages, wondered if they should struggle with the same effort against the death penalty. Some of them even favored capital punishment outright. Others who opposed it didn't push the issue, sensing that capital punishment enjoyed wide public support.

At one intense juncture of the debate, John Paul II made himself clear on the issue. "The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation," the Pope said during the Mass in the Trans World Dome in St. Louis on Jan. 27, 1999.

"A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil," he added. "Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform. I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary."

The Holy Father went even further. The previous day, at a St. Louis airport, in the presence of President Bill Clinton, he explained: "To choose life involves rejecting every form of violence: the violence of poverty and hunger, which oppresses so many human beings; the violence of armed conflict, which does not resolve but only increases divisions and tensions; the violence of particularly abhorrent weapons, such as antipersonnel mines; the violence of drug trafficking; the violence of racism; and the violence of mindless damage to the natural environment."

John Paul II believes it would be a great error to reduce the "culture of life" to the defense of the rights of the unborn. Rather, it has to extend to the whole of life, from conception until its natural end, in order to be credible.

He also insists on the defense of life "especially in relation to the challenges posed by genetic manipulation." This is, perhaps, the great challenge that man now faces, according to the Pope. The possibilities of scientific research, he warns, can make of man, especially at the first moment of his existence, a mere instrument of experimentation or prime matter sacrificed for the advantage of the pharmaceutical industry.

2. Promotion of the family

The second challenge is "the promotion of the family, the basic unit of society." Even before its ethical and religious dimension, the Pope presents the family as a human and social reality.

In the face of a globalized society that at times reduces people to the level of mere statistics, the family is the first place where "purely functional relationships" are overcome, in order to establish "interpersonal relationships that are rich in inner depth, gratuitousness and self-sacrifice," as John Paul II explained Oct. 15, 2000, during the Jubilee of Families. In the family, the man, woman and child are not consumers but persons with first and last names.

In an address to the Roman Rota last Feb. 11, the Pope warned about "the pervasive culture of individualism, which tends to limit and restrict marriage and the family to the private sphere."

Earlier, John Paul II told the Jubilee of Families: "The Church also knows -- and our daily experience confirms it -- that when this original plan is obscured in consciences, incalculable harm is done to society." Crime, suicide, poverty and marginalization increase when the divorce rate goes up, as many sociological studies have shown.

3. Elimination of poverty

The third challenge for John Paul II is "the elimination of poverty, through efforts to promote development, the reduction of debt, and the opening up of international trade."

In recent years, U.N. conferences on development have concluded that efforts to halve the rate of world poverty have been insufficient.

Given this situation, the Vatican officials insist increasingly that anti-poverty policies must make every person a protagonist in his future. The Vatican's U.N. permanent observer, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, said as much March 27 at a U.N. Human Rights Commission meeting.

"The sad fact," he said, "... is that many people, perhaps the majority today, do not have the means which would enable them to take their place in an effective and humanly dignified way within a productive system in which work is truly essential."

The archbishop insisted that poverty "today must be defined not simply in terms of a lack of economic means, but more in terms of an inability to realize fully that God-given human potential, with which each person, man or woman, is endowed. Fighting poverty, which has now been recognized as an essential overarching dimension of all developmental policy, must therefore be about enabling people to realize their God-given potential."

Facing this challenge, the Pope makes two specific requests. First, he calls for debt reduction for developing countries. Studies by the World Bank and International

Monetary Fund show that heavy debt reduces the public money available for education and health.

The Pope's second request is for the opening up of international trade, since a country's access to world markets has direct bearing on the economic well-being of its citizens. This request is particularly relevant to the United States and Europe, which preach the opening of markets (as during the March development conference in Mexico) but then raise tax barriers to products of developing countries.

4. Human rights

As the fourth challenge, the Holy Father to "respect for human rights in all situations, with especial concern for the most vulnerable: children, women and refugees."

At a Feb. 27 address to the Pontifical Academy for Life, he cited a "serious threat" posed by the "false interpretation of the rights of man, seen as the subjective rights of an individual or group, free from any reference to the truth of human nature," which can lead "even democratic systems of government to turn into an effective totalitarianism."

5. Disarmament

A fifth priority is "disarmament, the reduction of arms sales to poor countries, and the consolidation of peace after the end of conflicts."

Last April 8, Monsignor Francis Chullikat, deputy head of a Holy See delegation, addressed a committee for the 2005 review conference on the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. He said that the "conference on disarmament is paralyzed. One of the parties to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty has given notice of withdrawal. Nuclear weapons are still kept on alert status. The admonition of the International Court of Justice for the completion of negotiations toward elimination is ignored."

"Even more serious than the lack of progress," he added, "is the overt determination of some nuclear weapon states to maintain nuclear weapons in a critical role in their military doctrines. The old policies of nuclear deterrence, which prevailed in the Cold War, must now lead to concrete disarmament measures. The rule of law cannot countenance the continuation of doctrines that hold nuclear weapons as essential."

John Paul II committed himself personally, especially in 1999, to encouraging the international community to adopt the Ottawa Convention against the production, storage and commerce of anti-personnel mines -- "cold and blind instruments planned, constructed and used to wound or kill one or more persons," the Vatican told a summit held in Nicaragua.

Light weapons also concern the Pope. He has asked for commitment to struggle against this death trade. In an interview over Vatican Radio, Archbishop Renato Martino, the Vatican's U.N. permanent observer in New York, recalled that these types of arms cause 300,000 deaths every year, most of them civilians.

6. Medicine for all

The sixth challenge is "the fight against the major diseases, and access by the poor to basic care and medicines." In a letter written to a conference on ethics, science and medicine, held in Poland from April 5-6, the Pontiff said that some developing countries lack access to basic medicines because their economies are not financially attractive to the pharmaceutical industry.

During a World Trade Organization meeting on intellectual property rights, held in Geneva from June 18-22, 2001, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, the Vatican representative, said, "The AIDS crisis, together with the worrying return and diffusion of older infectious diseases, such as malaria and tuberculosis, constitutes a global disaster of dramatic magnitude." The legitimate interests of the pharmaceutical industry must be balanced with the need of poor countries for affordable medicines, he said.

"It is not possible ethically to justify a rationale of fixing the highest possible prices in order to attract investors and to maintain and strengthen research, while leaving aside consideration of fundamental social factors," Archbishop Martin said.

In this connection, the Church proposes that a full "and efficient universal access to basic medicines will most likely require the enactment of an innovative differential pricing system, which can still preserve the incentive for future research and development."

"Luxury and non-essential pharmaceutical products, for example, cosmetics, could well share a part of the burden of research and development of essential medicines," the archbishop suggested.

7. Conservation of the environment

The seventh challenge is "the protection of the environment and the prevention of natural disasters." During a general audience Jan. 17, 2001, John Paul II called for an "ecological conversion."

"Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts, and undertaken forms of unrestricted industrialization, degrading that 'flowerbed' -- to use an image from Dante Alighieri -- which is the earth, our dwelling place," the Pope said.

People, he insisted, must "encourage and support the 'ecological conversion' which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading."

"At stake, then, is not only a 'physical' ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of the various living beings, but also a 'human' ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations, and by preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity with the Creator's plan," he stressed.

8. Application of law

The eight and last challenge is "the rigorous application of international law and conventions."

Though the Catholic Church has criticized the Malthusian or relativist policies of certain U.N. agencies, it is at the same time one of the most committed allies of this institution. The Church sees the United Nations as a forum for promoting dialogue between nations and development, and for safeguarding international law.

At the U.N. Millennium Summit in New York on Sept. 8, 2000, Cardinal Angelo

Sodano, Vatican secretary of state, mentioned four fundamental duties proper to this institution. To wit: the preservation and promotion of "peace throughout the world"; "the promotion of development"; "the promotion of human rights"; and the "guaranteeing" of "the equality of all its members."

"Of course," the Pope told the ambassadors when he ended his list of challenges, "many other demands could also be mentioned." He added: "But if these priorities became the central concerns of political leaders; if people of good will made them part of their daily endeavors; if religious believers included them in their teaching, the world would be a radically different place."

* * *

John Paul II's January address to diplomats at the Vatican may be consulted at www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=14943.