

Julia Mundl

Theological and ethical reflections on the role of the Catholic Church in environmental policy debate in selected European countries.

Given that Europe - even if it is still predominantly Christian - is characterized by its diverse and divergent ideologies, and moreover is still the driving force behind the development of environmental standards on the political stage, one might consider Europe something of a role model in global terms. How, and under what terms and conditions the Catholic Church contributes to Europe's political image and can continue to contribute in the future are the questions which this study sets out to answer. From a theological and ethical perspective, it is not merely a question of the ecological issues, but more generally about contingency management. Ecological questions cannot be understood as isolated issues, which is why most people see them as "socialized" problems, e.g. the loss or damage to habitats, existential danger caused by pollution and lack of resources and an unfair distribution of benefits and risks, i.e. wealth and poverty.

Modern transitional society is travelling towards a yet uncertain future. The erosion of traditional moral authorities has led to a vacuum, with society disorientated and facing entirely new challenges. The current situation increasingly suggests the conclusion that society is in need of a new system of values, which can be applied not only direct human interactions, but also - given the prevalence of ecological disasters and the knowledge that the potentially damaging consequences of today's decisions will reach their full intensity only decades or even centuries from now - to also to uphold inter- and intra-generational justice.

The Catholic Church, in its capacity as one of the earliest "global players", has the potential to play a fundamental role. Sustainability, in the sense of maintaining a constant quality of life for current and future generations is a demand allied to the most basic Christian idea of justice, even if this has not yet been explicitly formulated as such by the institution of the Church. At the same time, the task of looking after Creation is a rediscovered demand which unfortunately society is far from understanding, let alone fulfilling.

Against this background, environmental politics - driven by the immediacy of the topic and the completeness with which whole communities are affected - is the greatest challenge facing governments and other responsible bodies, including the Catholic Church, worldwide.

Europe consists of very different nation states, with the most diverse historical developments. Despite all these differences and divergences in their common history, there have been recurring events of historical significance which, if not necessarily unifying, have contributed to the sense of a shared background. The most recent event of this magnitude was the fall of the Berlin wall, the opening of the Iron Curtain and the end of divided Europe, which took place in the years 1989-1990. For this reason, my investigation will take this watershed date as its starting point.

Against this landscape I will use a selection of European countries to attempt to answer the question as to how the Catholic Church influences environmental policy. I will give a descriptive overview of the conclusions of the National Conference of Bishops, the work of religious orders and the role of the laity in engaging with climate protection and sustainable development, focusing on environmental activism and its effectiveness within the laws governing the relationship between state and church.