

**A TIME FOR NEW HOPE**

Keynote Address

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Distinguished guests and dear participants,

Today is a day of joy and celebration, a day of light and hope. If someone had told me in 1972, the year Barbara Ward and René Dubos published their famous book “Only One Earth,” the reference text for the Stockholm Conference, that in 2010 I would be opening a conference on Green Churches, I would never have believed it. The fact that we are holding such an event shows that we have come a long way. And that is why, in spite of the seriousness of the crisis and the magnitude of the challenges that lie ahead, we must speak of joy and hope. That is why I have entitled my address “A time for new hope.”

I would like to thank the conference organizer, Norman Lévesque, and wish you all every success. We need to have courage and intelligence, and to be ready for some hard work. But as Gilles Vigneault says in one of his songs: “There’s no such thing as the ends of the earth, and yet off we go in search of them.”

I - RAISING AWARENESS

Christians, especially Christians in Anglo-Saxon countries, have been behind much of the work of raising awareness of the environmental crisis and building an environmental movement. In French and Latin cultural milieus, awareness has grown much more slowly.

In this area, there is a cultural difference that I do not have time to go into today. In Quebec, the increase in awareness has also been relatively slow because people’s energies were primarily occupied with the Quiet Revolution and the question of nationhood; the environmental issue seemed secondary, like a luxury for the rich.

And yet, in environmental policy, Quebec has often been at the forefront for certain issues. The *Environmental Quality Act* dates back to 1972. Environmental assessment regulations date from 1979. During the 1980s, Quebec was a leader in the issue of acid rain, just as it is now in the area of climate change.

In terms of consciousness-raising among the Christian churches, the World Council of Churches deserves praise for its constant concern for the integrity of creation. But grassroots awareness seems to me to have been slower off the mark. To speak of the church I know best, the Catholic Church of Quebec, consciousness-raising has been very slow, as issues of religious practice, sexual ethics and institutional adjustment seemingly took a higher priority.

That is why today’s event marks both a beginning and a renewal. Quebec’s militant ecologists have not found in their church the spiritual, fraternal and theological support they were looking for. They have therefore remained on its fringes. May the ecumenical dimension of this event also help us to transcend our institutional barriers.

II - IS THERE A CRISIS?

Very often, people ask if there really is a crisis, and if we are not getting frightened for nothing. If the universe is an organized system that operates like clockwork, then why worry about it? Let things take their course and everything will return to normal, one way or another. There have always been crises. Just think back to the ice age. Some species disappeared, and others took their place, which allowed life to diversify. Nothing new under the sun, as the sage Qohelet said. Everything that is has already been. After winter comes the spring.

People frighten us with so many things: the latest flu, global warming, which even certain experts have doubts about, asbestos, electricity and much more. On the eve of every scientific convention, there are plenty of experts who want to alert us to the next huge risk: at some point, we realize that they’re looking for more grants to carry on their research and are attempting to take society hostage by fear-mongering.

In this context of general anxiety, society often falls victim to a certain media blackmail. This is a well-known fact. For my part, I am one of those who think that there really is a crisis, a huge one, one that is more serious than people say, but that is also more complex and more profound that the media think, a crisis that threatens civilization itself and the very survival of the human species. As Jared Diamond has pointed out, we have to consider the possibility of collapse.

Those who are familiar with my work know that I present the crisis in the form of four bombs that I call D, P, C and I.

“D” is for the demographic bomb. Any biological species risks overpopulation if it is not subject to the constraints of territory, climate, food, disease, predators or parasites. The hare population is controlled by foxes, but foxes are no match for wolves. Similarly, without wolves, deer would quickly multiply and would end up grazing all the vegetation in their milieu and consequently die of starvation. The human species has always been subject to control mechanisms like childhood diseases, epidemics, drought, famine and natural catastrophes, not to mention war.

But in the past few centuries, humanity seems to have overcome the constraints: first, through hygiene, then medicine, the advancement of science and technology, a higher standard of living, greater comfort, a more varied and plentiful food supply, a drop in infant mortality, a longer life expectancy. The D bomb is not just an effect of nature: it is the direct result of the development of science and culture.

“P” is for pollution. Nature works more or less like a balanced system, where the wastes of one are the resources of another. I say “more or less”, because there have been some spectacular failures. By using new energy sources (coal, natural gas, oil, nuclear fission or fusion), by intervening in the chemistry of bodies, human beings have upset the balances in place, either by creating new molecules that are dangerous to life, or by the massive amounts of waste they produce. Air, water, soil pollution.

“I” is for inequity…iniquity. Human development is not homogeneous, unfortunately, and human history is an unending tale of conflict and war between peoples and nations, of tensions within groups, between rich and poor, nobles and commoners, city-dwellers and country folk, men and women.

The 20th century was the scene of two terrible conflicts, the First and Second World Wars, as well as numerous smaller wars. After 1945, we had a respite. After coming to grips with the horror of Nazism, it seemed that humanity attempted to set up a new order, by promulgating human rights, international agreements, development strategies that involved the developed countries assisting what was called the Third World.

But in the past 20 years or more, people have forgotten the lessons of the past and the desire to achieve a certain equality or equity has taken a pounding everywhere. Our world has shrunk and its resources, as we know, are limited. It is impossible to have infinite development in a finite world. And so we are witnessing the frantic efforts of the big and powerful to get their hands on the earth’s last resources: oil, precious metals, water, ocean resources, etc. The condition for development is equity. The absence of equity, the excess of power wielded by the powerful over the powerlessness of the powerless has led to the financial crisis we are currently experiencing (perpetrated by financiers with no morals), war, terrorism and fundamentalism.

“C” is for the consumption bomb. We cannot live without consuming: food, space, energy, paper, clothing, leisure, etc. But our society has become a consumer society. Not a society that uses, enjoys or savours. But a society of destruction and predation, where the ambition is not to use but to abuse, and to consume for the sake of consuming. Consumption has become of the social symbol of success and self-affirmation. When I was young, on Sunday, we went to church. It was there, stepping out of the tight-knit world of our families, that we became aware of belonging to a community. And so we became citizens. Today, our place of worship is the shopping centre. That is where we can hear the heartbeat of society. That is where one becomes a true citizen. In this time of crisis, we are exhorted to consume, to spend in order to keep the economy going.

However, the desire to consume is insatiable if we cannot place it within a broader perspective. Consumption is no longer a means to an end. It has become an end in itself, the purpose of living, because it is through consumption that people are recognized as someone and think they can achieve happiness.

The results of this are absurd, of course. The earth is a small and fragile planet. When you put together the D bomb (7 billion people and counting), the P bomb (pollution partially under control, but constantly renewing itself), the I bomb (with irrational human conflict) and the C bomb (a never-ending search for a better lifestyle), you reach an impasse.

The environmental crisis is no accident. It is the necessary result of immoderate human development, the fruit of a close-minded rationalism focused on the short-term effectiveness of science and technology, a thirst for power that is never quenched and a desire to devour the entire planet through consumption.

III – THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CRISIS

Without going into too much detail, I would summarize the main characteristics of the crisis by the following elements:

* It is a global crisis of humanity that ultimately affects everyone because it is connected with the Earth as a system and its balances;
* It is a crisis in which the rich bear a greater and more pressing responsibility than others;
* It is an ethical crisis par excellence which calls our entire ethos into questions, as well as our conduct vis-à-vis each of the bombs mentioned: D, P, I and C. The ethos of technical and scientific rationality, the ethos of the consumer society, the ethos of a distorted Christianity that makes humanity the centre of everything: all these are disqualified. We must find a new foundation for our ethos, in a process that includes all people and all living things;
* It is a spiritual crisis in the deepest meaning of the term, that is, to do with breath and our vision of ourselves and the world. There is no ascent toward God without an assumption of all Creation. There is no taking charge of the world’s beauty without an openness to the transcendent, because beauty is always a message to someone;
* It is a crisis that calls science and technology into question, not in their intrinsic legitimacy, but in the form of a rationality that implies a focus on power and profit and the instrumentalization of all living things;
* It is a crisis that transcends loyalties:

- national and cultural

- religious, whatever the beliefs

- interdenominational, between the different Christian churches.

We are both the victims and the perpetrators of what is happening, even if we are not all responsible to the same degree. If we fail, we will all lose.

As Christians, we must also accept harsh criticism from others about the Christian heritage. This heritage, with its conception of human beings as made in the image of God with the mandate to have dominion over the world, secularized the natural world in a way, and could have given rise to human imperialism. Which is in fact what has happened.

IV - A THEOLOGICAL LOOK

From a theological perspective, the environmental crisis can be considered as a sign of the times, a sign through which God speaks to us and invites us to conversion and hope:

* By revising our concept of happiness and progress, a happiness that is based on relationships rather than on predation;
* By inviting us to become better. It is often when they become aware of the environment that young people build their ethos, change their lifestyle, get involved in politics and start to care about others: the poor who live here and beyond the borders of their country;
* By prompting us to change the way we look at nature, not just as exterior decoration, but as a world animated by the creative Breath of God and of which we are one component;
* By encouraging us to revise our concept of God and salvation, to explore what is called God’s immanence and His love toward all creation.

V - THE TASK OF THE CHURCHES

The pastoral construction site that awaits us is of considerable size and complexity. It will be difficult because of the resistance of grassroots Christians to justice issues and the need to go beyond the usual ethos that is widespread in accepted Christian culture: sex, piety, the family, short-term interpersonal relationships focused on charity, or even the three K’s used by the Germans to define woman’s sphere: Kinder, Küche, Kirche (children, kitchen, church). First, we must change the vision of the world and of God that we have developed in our current interpretation of Scripture, which seeks to put humanity up on a pedestal; we must stop thinking about human beings as being outside or above the world, and return to a concept of human beings as being part of nature without denying our ability to break down some of the determinants of nature. Above all, we must not make short-sighted apologetics on this point, citing a few Bible verses to say that the answer is in the Bible. There is a very rich vision of human beings and creation in the Bible, but the Biblical universe is fairly narrow (being an agricultural world) which does not envisage the environmental issue;

* It is also important to integrate the environment into Christian ethics, which I call the third tablet;
* We must return to voluntary simplicity, not for ascetic reasons but environmental ones, connected to quality of life, inter- and intra-generational equity and the planet’s inherent limitations, and for spiritual reasons, namely, the divine dimension of human experience;
* We must be tireless in connecting the fight for the environment with social struggle. There is a huge amount of resistance in our communities with regard to social issues. The great liberation theologian Leonardo Boff emphasized this idea, that the erosion of the relationship between human beings and nature led to the erosion of relationships of human beings among themselves;
* Along with Francis of Assisi and many others, it seems to me that it is essential to give a place of honour to cosmic praise, to pray with creation and express the prayer of creation, to be the voice of praise and thanksgiving that rises from the rocks, the water, the birds, the animals, the mountains to the Creator;
* And finally, in everyday life, with regard to paper, energy, plastic cups, water (bottled or not), the smallest actions in everyday life, in managing buildings as in managing a meeting, without locking ourselves into a stifling moralism, it is important to be as consistent as possible. But let’s always leave some room for creativity. The ecological fight is so big that everyone can find his or her own niche without having to be carbon copies of each other.

VI - THE TRANSITION TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In closing, I would like to say a word about sustainable development. Canada has a statute concerning development. So does Quebec. In both cases, there is a Commissioner of the Environment within the office of the Auditor General. This is tremendous and promising for the future. But we are only at the first steps. It will take at least a generation – 25 to 30 years – before there is any real change in politics. Politics today are completely dominated by what may be called economic science. But economics has two major flaws: first, it is insensitive to equity and justice because it instrumentalizes human beings; and second, it is still unable to internalize environmental rights. The economy cannot actually claim to manage living things because living things extend over the long and sometimes the very long term, while political time does not exceed five years, and economic time rarely exceeds 10 years. Furthermore, the complexity of ecological systems completely transcends the parameters of economic models, in spite of the sophistication of so-called econometric models. This calls for patience and vigilance. We are currently going through an economic recession and governments are trying to dig their way out of it by encouraging us to consume more and develop projects at all costs, even if it means disregarding impact studies. We may succeed in getting out of the very short-term crisis, but only at the cost of setting up the conditions for another, even more serious crisis. The crisis will get far worse instead of better, and all because we did not have the courage to make sustainable development a genuine part of the recovery.

The U.S. cannot introduce sustainable development if the consumer society is not conquered from within. And this cannot happen without a profound change in our values, our concept of life and happiness, our perception of human beings.

In this context, today’s meeting is prophetic. You are writing a new page in our history, you are starting a new chapter in our witness as believers in Jesus Christ. In spite of the magnitude of the task before us, it is a time for hope.

Thank you, and be of good courage!

André Beauchamp