



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

## ECOLOGY & SUSTAINABILITY

EU'S COMPETENCES  
CHURCH'S VISION  
COMECE'S CONTRIBUTION

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## EU's competence

The [Treaty of Lisbon](#) (2007) and the consolidated versions (2010) of the “[Treaty on European Union](#)” and the “[Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#)” with its incorporated “[Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union](#)” specifies Sustainable Action and Environmental Policy as the overarching Treaty objectives of the European Union.

The Preamble to the Treaty on European Union (TEU) points out the EU's determination to promote “*environmental protection [...] and sustainable development.*” In view of the EU's internal market and economic growth (Art. 3 EUD) and external action (Art. 21 EUD) these objectives are once more confirmed.

The Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) concretises these objectives: “*Environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Union's policies and activities particularly with a view to promoting sustainable development*” (Art. 11 TFEU), and Title XIX, Articles 191-193, are dedicated fully to environment protection.

In the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, sustainability and environmental protection are mentioned twice: the preamble states that the EU seeks “*to promote balanced and sustainable development*”. Article 37 classifies environmental protection and sustainable action as fundamental rights: “*A high level of environmental protection and the improvement of the quality of the environment must be integrated into the policies of the Union and ensured in accordance with the principle of sustainable development.*”

The Treaties clearly reveal that sustainability and environmental responsibility are not individual and independent policy areas, but constitute a horizontal issue that must be observed in all European Union policy areas. These include, to name just a few: [Agriculture](#), [Fisheries](#), [Economy](#)- and [Industry](#), [Energy](#), [Development](#), [Climate Protection](#), [Research](#), etc.

At the same time the European Union supports international development toward greater sustainability such as the adoption of the “[UN Development Goals](#)” by the UN General Assembly in September 2015. In view of the UN Climate Protection Conference (COP 21) in December 2015 in Paris the Member States have agreed on a [common position](#) and are working towards reaching a binding agreement.

The European Union defines sustainable development as follows: “*Sustainable development means that the needs of the present generation should be met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is an overarching objective of the European Union set out in the Treaty, governing **all the Union's policies and activities**. It is about safeguarding the earth's capacity to support life in all its diversity and is based on the principles of democracy, gender equality, solidarity, the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights, including freedom and equal opportunities for all. It aims at **the continuous improvement of the quality of life and well-being on Earth for present and future generations**. To that end it*

*promotes a dynamic economy with full employment and a high level of education, health protection, social and territorial cohesion and environmental protection in a peaceful and secure world, respecting cultural diversity.”* (Council of the European Union, [Review of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy](#), 26 June 2006).

The European Union accordingly analyses and evaluates a whole range of aspects of our everyday lives from the point of view of sustainability: [Resource efficiency](#) (2011), [Closed-loop economy](#) (2014/2015+) and the [Consumption of Natural Resources \(2013\)](#), [Conditions of Production and Consumption](#), [Foodstuffs](#), [Building and Housing](#), [Urban Planning and Mobility](#). Aspects of a sustainable environmental policy have also been integrated into the framework of the “[European Semester](#)” (coordination of EU economic policy): how can the EU develop a “sustainable macroeconomic policy?”

In 2001, the European Commission submitted a first “Strategy for sustainable action” to embed the sustainability issue firmly in the Union’s policies. In [2006](#) and [2009](#) the strategy was evaluated, revised and then adopted in [2011](#) by the European Council looking towards the Rio +20 conference.

After the new Commission under Jean-Claude Juncker had taken up office, the energy and climate change policies were merged to form the new “[EU 2030 Policy Framework for Climate and Energy](#)”, which was adopted in autumn 2014. This will contribute to the achievement of a reduction of at least 40% in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 by comparison with emissions in 1990, and a 27% improvement in energy efficiency and share of renewable energy in the European Union.

Over the years the EU has adopted a range of positions (e.g. [White Paper on Adaptation to Climate Change](#)), strategies and “[roadmaps](#)” and has also drawn up programmes (e.g. [Environmental Action Programme](#), [Eco-innovation Action Plan](#)) in order to achieve its ambitious goals. Public [consultations](#) are held with various stakeholders, including civil society organisations, churches and church organisations, inviting them to participate in the improvement of sustainable development and environmental protection policies. In the end, the only way to provide the necessary basis for the [required social change](#) is to have the widest possible public debate and participation.



## Church's vision

Ecclesial awareness of the environment is both old and new. A foundation for the awareness that man is not a totally autonomous, self-referent being but is a creature and thus part of creation as already laid out in the Bible. From the perspective of the Creator, all created beings are closely linked, brethren, as acknowledged in St. Francis' prayer "[Canticle of the Sun](#)". This biblical understanding, however, has faded into the background in favour of a new concept that regards the human being as the "pride of creation" in the role of the "owner and ruler" of the world instead of its "good and responsible custodian", i.e. not regarding the environment as a common asset but as a resource for human action that must be exploited, fostered and preserved responsibly.

After the Second Vatican Council there has been a gradually growing awareness of the environment and sustainable development, particularly in the churches. Both Pope Paul VI (Apostolic Letter "[Octogesima adveniens](#)"<sup>1</sup>, Address to the FAO) and Pope John Paul II (Encyclical Letter "[Redemptor hominis](#)"<sup>2</sup>, "[Centesimus annus](#)"<sup>3</sup>, and other) as well as Pope Benedict XVI (Encyclical Letter "[Caritas in veritate](#)"<sup>4</sup>) have from time to time and in detail given their views on how to deal with the environment and on the human role within creation. As a common asset belonging to all humans, both now and in future generations, it is our responsibility to preserve a healthy undamaged environment.<sup>5</sup> This responsibility must appropriately be taken into account at both legal and institutional level.

In view of the possible risks for the environment, the 'precautionary principle' must be the determinant of our actions. The same applies in particular to applications based on biotechnology. Since the Earth and its riches belong jointly to all people, its exploitation must respect the principles of fairness and solidarity. "*Individual and collective greed are contrary to the order of creation. Current global environmental problems can only be resolved effectively by cooperation on an international level that is better suited to coordinate the use of the earth's resources*"<sup>6</sup>.

With the Encyclical Letter "[Laudato si'](#)"<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis has, for the first time, presented a papal document dedicated extensively to the subject of ecology, though ecology is not tantamount to or exclusively to be equated with "environmental protection". In his view of an "integral and holistic ecology", Pope Francis studies the relationship between environment, economy, technology, society, politics, and culture, indicating that an

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<sup>1</sup> Apostolic Letter *Octogesima adveniens* (14 May 1971).

<sup>2</sup> Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis* (4 March 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus* (1 May 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* (29 June 2009).

<sup>5</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 465.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 481.

<sup>7</sup> Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (18 June 2015)

ecological crisis cannot be viewed separately from the social crisis. In the light of this crisis, there is a need for an “ecological conversion” and a different lifestyle, a different, fair and solidary form of economy and a policy that, given the global challenges, is able to think and act globally.

The notion of human beings being embedded in the environment and their associated responsibility and the limitation of human actions is more firmly rooted in the Orthodox Church's theology (also theologically) than in that of the Catholic Church. The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople had already introduced the World Day of Prayer for Creation on 1st of September 1989 consistent with the Ecumenical Decade “Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation” proclaimed by the European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel in 1989. As suggested by the Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople, Pope Francis followed this initiative for the Catholic Church on 6 August 2015 and called for all Christians to celebrate the 1st of September as the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation”.

Sustainable development and environmental protection, especially in the context of international developmental policy, are specifically endorsed by the Pontifical Council *Justitia et Pax* and also by the two church organisations [Caritas Internationalis](#) (or [Caritas Europa](#)) as well as by [CIDSE](#), a network organised by laypeople from Catholic development organisations in Europe and North America.



## COMECE's contribution

Up to the present, COMECE has been engaged with sustainability and environmental issues only within the framework of other activities or on an ad hoc basis.

For example, COMECE was a member of the network of environmental officers of the Council of European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE) and took part in its work and activities. COMECE is also associated with environmental networks of national Bishops' Conferences, such as the German and Austrian Bishops' Conferences.

It also participated in the preparations for the “Rio +20 Conference” in 2011, contributing its own opinion.

Perhaps the organisation's most thorough exploration of the subject of environmental protection was a **report to the Bishops of COMECE** prepared by a top-level working group of scientists headed by the former European Commissioner for Agriculture, Franz Fischler, in the years 2007 to 2008. In the run-up to the COP15 in Copenhagen in December 2009 the report was discussed in a dialogue seminar with representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

COMECE is working together with scientists on drawing up its own report for the COP-21 in Paris in December 2015.

The Encyclical Letter “*Laudato si'*” published in June 2015 spurred COMECE on to take on a more active role in the future to address the topic of ecology and sustainability.



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