

Contribution by the secretariat of the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the EU (COMECE) to the European Commission's consultation on a Proposal for a recommendation on *Education for environmental sustainability*

The 'European Green Deal' (EGD) adopted by the European Commission in December 2019 has since been elaborated in more detail in various dimensions: energy, transport, circular economy, food, agriculture, climate protection, preservation of biodiversity etc. In this context, a separate recommendation on education and training for more environmental sustainability is an important complementary element and an essential building block to achieve the goals set in the EGD: sustainability is not mainly achieved through technological solutions, but through a change in perception, thinking and action - a **change in mindset**. This applies to all generations and thus to all areas of learning - formal, non-formal and informal. A fundamental prerequisite for sustainability is a new understanding of nature, of the natural limits of our planet and of the conditions of a socially fair and just society.

Sustainability can be achieved if we learn to live and manage within the natural limits of our planet and the social limits of our society (Raworth, Donut Economy). However, such a change in mentality will only be possible gradually and through a **comprehensive dialogue** involving all parts of society, including Churches and religious communities. This applies in particular to the Catholic Church, which has presented a **philosophical-anthropological and theological blueprint** with its social encyclical letters, including in particular "Laudato Si" by Pope Francis (2015). The same applies to those church organisations that have often gathered experience in the field of sustainability and education over decades and have built up relevant practical expertise. Against this background, we would like to address and briefly elaborate on three points: 1) *Philosophical and theological considerations*; 2) *Terminology of sustainability*; 3) *Pedagogical suggestions for the education sector*.

1. *Philosophical and theological considerations*

In recent years, the acceleration of all processes in our society and in the world of work has produced a so-called "**rapidification**" (LS, Ch. 1, 17-19). This tends towards quick 'technocratic solutions' and disregards deeper reflection on the consequences of our actions in a complex and globalised society. Moreover, **contemporary anthropocentrism** has led to **hyper-individualistic practices**, weakened social bonds and the willingness to collectively address (environmental) challenges, and affected the whole social fabric of society, the relationships between citizens, communities and States. One of the effects is the (almost exclusive) **understanding of man as a consumer** (LS 11), which seems to have replaced the self-understanding of man as a citizen and, moreover, as a person-in-community. This change has lasting effects on the individual person, as well as on the whole society, on its identity and on the relationship of people with each other, increasingly defined through market terminology. (Sandel 2011, Krastev 2017).

As a possible response to such developments, a **Christian theological interpretation** of nature and the environment provides a starting point to think about solutions for the ecological challenge and about education as a possible way of approaching it. If **nature** is understood as **non-disposable** (i.e. Creation), hence as an element that does not belong to humans, but that people are allowed to use - with a view to the previously mentioned limits and to future generations -, then this interpretation implies responsibility in concrete terms.

From a Christian perspective, “responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world” (LS, Ch. 1, pt. 2, 68). Every human being is called to live in harmony with creation and in **coexistence** with all human beings, respecting human dignity and the integrity of nature. This ecological approach is **committed to the common good**, which includes all in a perspective of caring and sharing.

2. Terminology of sustainability

Deriving from the previous philosophical and theological considerations, a term encompassing all societal and environmental aspects, leading to true sustainable behaviours, is needed. The term “**integral ecology**” points out to the necessity to consider elements of ecology in their **interrelatedness**, addressing environmental, economic, social and cultural aspects in a comprehensive manner, ensuring that technological progress does not lead to disregard certain areas by favouring others and, therefore, creates imbalances for the equilibrium of our societies and environment (LS, Ch. 4. Pts. I, II). An authentic development of integral ecology cannot overlook the need for **change in personal lifestyles** and a specific focus on a broader vision of **intergenerational justice** (LS, Ch. 4. Pts. III, V).

3. Pedagogical suggestions for the education sector

When looking into how education and training can support the move towards a more sustainable and resource-conserving society and economy, previous philosophical and theological considerations and the term ‘integral ecology’ elucidate some aspects that education needs to consider when approaching sustainability.

1. The concept of integral ecology could foster common understanding of the basic principles needed to reach a “**shared language on sustainability**” and comprehensively address issues of sustainability including all areas (e.g. lifestyle, social practices, work, study, leisure, etc.). In particular, an ‘integral ecology’ approach would support the European Green Deal by allowing to consider all consequences of EU policies in these fields.
2. Education for environmental sustainability should be shaped through a “**whole-of-society**” **approach**, including all **forms** of education - e.g., formal, non-formal and informal education, as well as vocational training - and all **actors** involved in education - formal ones as well as informal ones, in particular families, communities and associations - through a **lifelong learning** approach. The promotion of ecology and sustainability is one of the objectives of non-formal groups linked to Churches and religious communities in Europe (e.g. catechesis groups, scouts).

3. The integration of environmental issues in education curricula should go beyond promoting awareness, **generating an authentic understanding of social, economic and environmental matters** that prompts ecological habits and lifestyle, in a perspective of harmonization between humanity and environment that fosters an “ecological conversion” (LS, Ch. III) of each and every learner.
4. With a view to integral ecology in education, values such as **care, sobriety and humility** should be central. They could support the turn from a mere consumerist view of society towards a common-good oriented, socially sustainable and environmentally friendly approach to nature and people.
5. Education for environmental sustainability should foster knowledge and competences for authentic **ecological citizenship**. To reach such objective, **the task for educators is to communicate**, besides the comprehensive understanding of the environment, the need for a responsible use of natural resources, the care of nature, the capacity to care for and live together with others and in communion with all, fostering practices of solidarity and sharing. To this aim, a stronger **focus on parents and teachers as primary educators of sustainability** would be beneficial and necessary.