



# A Biblical call for responsible fishing?

## Introduction

During the papal audience at the 23th World Congress of the Apostleship Of the Sea, Benedictus XVI addressed encouraging words to those working in the vast fishing sector and their families: “... , *they more than others must face the difficulties of the present time and live the uncertainty of the future, marked by the negative effects of climate change and the excessive exploitation of resources. To you fishermen, who seek decent and safe working conditions, safeguarding the dignity of your families, the protection of the environment and the defence of every person’s dignity, I would like to ensure the Church’s closeness.*”

We believe that God and his principles in the first pages of his Bible must get the place of honour where the ecological debate takes place. It’s a hot item that touches the whole world very emotionally. It’s our mission to bring Gods Words to the attention of the policymakers.

50 years ago, the Council Fathers emphasized the fact that “*the greater man's power becomes, the farther his responsibility extends*”, and that every human activity is to correspond, according to the design and will of God, to humanity's true good.”(C.S.D. 457)

What are Gods Biblical principles in his call to fishermen for responsible fishing?  
In this article, we attempt to put together some Biblical considerations.

## The call for ecological awareness

*"If we continue like this, there will be disasters on our planet."* Such words seem to come from the last book of the Bible. But not the angels blow the trumpets of the apocalypse. It is the climatologists and ecologists. Now, after the onset of globalization, the fishermen face an environmental challenge. Consumers and international fishery factories heard the call of nature lovers. The demand for ecological awareness in dealing with all creation, and in particular in dealing with sustainable food harvesting from the sea, is becoming urgent.

The older generations in fishery consider environmental problems as naturally occurring defects of nature, grossly exaggerated by the media. Younger fishermen look at it differently. They ask: what's going on? It seems as though nature does not regulate itself anymore. *"Man is the culprit"*, one calls.

In the old days we could harvest, pick, fish and feast without restriction. Nature was no concern. Now it seems that nature is out of balance, and that nature has come to depend upon our help.



## Religious ecology

Since the 'prophetic' exclamation of ex-vice-president Al Gore in his "The Inconvenient Truth" the theme of caring for the environment has become hype.

A collective fear grew for the survival of the earth and all living things. This fear is the foundation from which a new religion comes: a religious ecology. The major themes of such a religion are: vitality, non-violence, an ethic of self-control and management, cosmic sensitivity, etc.

Nourished by a so called 'green spirituality' it slings accusations toward fishers: '...that they upset the balance in the sea, that they must be ashamed for what they do to nature, that they are the destroyers of marine life, etc.'

The fanatical zealots of that religion plead for a systematic reduction of growth and even claims that fishery must stop completely: *'Let fishery disappear!'*

## An ecological symbol in the central sacrament of our church

Our fishermen are hunters! It is in their genes. They feel themselves called to sea for hunting the food that Mother Nature gives to sustain ourselves, and the people at home. Without fish, no bread!

Fishermen strongly believe in God! During the celebrations for fishing families, a crew brings a fish basket to the altar as an offering. This is a beautiful testimony of Christian ecological consciousness. In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Lord, they are aware that the fruits of their work are given by God. It is God's gifts that they give thanks for. Sacrificing some of their catch is their language to express what they cannot say in words.

We have to make it clear to people that our Church is strongly committed to addressing ecological problems. The Church is more ecologically minded than most give it credit for. She is concerned about much more than the earth and what naturally grows, walks and swims in it. The Church bases her moral approach and ethical concerns about the family and all aspects of human life on Jesus' moral message and spiritual development. (CSD 212)

The papal letters and the Social Doctrine of the Church are witnesses to this! She knows and proclaims that God is the Father of the great family of people, animals, and plants. Her "ecology" is not just a horizontal feeling of togetherness, but results from a vertical relationship: the entire universe is God's work of creation.

Our Church holds a principled position: people should manage creation, not control it. Everything has to do with good management, good stewardship. That was already said in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) of Pope John Paul II and the recent *Caritas in Veritate* of Benedict XVI (June 2009), besides being included in many themes of the *Social Doctrine of the church*.



## Fishing is complying with a divine order

"I believe in God, *Creator of heaven and earth ...*" So begins our credo which has its origins in the Bible, the oldest attempt to express who God is. We start by saying that He is the Creator. In the first pages of the Bible, He speaks to the man whom He creates last of all: "*Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground.*" (Gen. 1:28)

So, man has a contract in respect of the earth. He gets a divine command. God does not give orders that are not feasible. He does not ask impossible things, but that we would change our attitudes and behaviour. Our task on this planet is a blessing, not a curse or punishment.

Man is just an administrator. He isn't an owner. He works in employment. His energy was given to him by God. In the middle of the story of the Fall and the command to work the earth (Gen. 3), we get the divine promise of the "completion". God's order to work includes a promise: He himself will complete this commission. The development, maintenance and preservation of the created world has everything to do with God. Man is not alone! It isn't just a matter of responsibility and efforts of man alone.

## Jewish-Christian roots

*"Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."<sup>2</sup> The fear and dread of you will fall on all the beasts of the earth, and on all the birds in the sky, on every creature that moves along the ground, and on all the fish in the sea; they are given into your hands.<sup>3</sup> Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you."* (Gen 9:1-3a)

One accusation aimed at our faith is that Christianity condones the exploitation of nature. Without the Bible, it is said, the ecological derailment would never have occurred. Christians are the cause of all this degradation, because the Christians interpreted God's command in Genesis (1:28 and 9:1-3a) as a license to act arbitrarily with the earth. Therefore the Bible is considered the main reason for our ecological inadequacy. The Bible urges, even commands humanity to do with the earth what it wants for human benefit, for human wellness. Admittedly there is some truth in that. The Bible has indeed been interpreted to mean this. Witnessing to the expansion of knowledge and technical achievement, Hugh of St. Victor argued: "With the technical achievements we humans can, finally, fulfil the subject of the earth (dominium terrae) from Gen. 1." Since the Renaissance, the ideas of unstoppable progress, initiative and creativity, made their entrance. The entrepreneurial spirit of man had no brakes.

In addition, Calvinism has placed a great emphasis on the responsibility of man: "he" must roll up his sleeves and work on the earth. So one runs the risk to cut and lose the bond between God and man, between the owner and operator. What will prevail is the human commitment and entrepreneurial spirit to build the world. Ultimately this led, it is claimed, to the expropriation of the property of God, and also to secularism. The world of man and God disappears in the background. This has dangerous consequences: men exploit arbitrarily God's property.



## Man and nature are partners! A Biblical view

Looking to the Bible for its view of creation, we find a two-handed approach.

On the one hand, Scripture is deeply contemplative. She has an adoring and respectful look at creation, at nature, and assumes a respectful distance from it. The eye plays the main role: to look, not touch. Man feels himself a small creature in view of the vastness of creation. He marvels at the immense grandeur and admires it.

On the other hand Scripture gives us another opinion about the man and his relations to the earth. God commands men: “do, work, act, be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it and rule over the fish of the sea...”

### 1 The ‘little’ men must admire, adore creation!

- *“O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”* (Psalm 8, 4-9).

These words from Psalm 8 could come out of a fisherman’s mouth. They are people with a sensitive heart under a tough skin. They feel their business expeditiously carried by the waves. They are deeply touched, affected by the infinite space, by the overwhelming force of water which can turn from a flat mirror into a swirling tub full of dangers.

Fishermen have, at some time in their career, seen the so-called "monkfish" and experienced a deep and intense terror of life. What they experience at sea is too difficult to describe. The seas are too big and their words too small to express what that greatness does inside themselves. Remember that the fisherman’s faith merges lived experiences of sailing the seas with snippets of childhood catechism.

A fisherman told me: *"If the water at night is quiet, I dare to stop my engine and lie down on the deck. I will be deeply touched by the sight of the sky, the immense greatness of it The silence and the swell of the water leaves me in awe. It is as if Jesus comes to me. “Perhaps this was also the experience of the disciples when Jesus came up to them on the water? (Mk 6.49-52)*

- At the end of the book of Job (from 38:4 -11) a human being is very small and surrounded by the greatness of nature. He may look and even speak to the great God. But God has the last word:



*“How small are you, little man. Look how big I am. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding, who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it? On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together. And all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who enclosed the sea with doors when, bursting forth, it went out from the womb; when I made a cloud its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and I placed boundaries on it and set a bolt and doors, and I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther.'” (Job 38.4 to 11)*

## **2 The 'great' men must stewards over the creation**

In the scripture we hear God saying to men: *“do, take down, edit, issue, and form to complete. “Let the earth and subject to your authority ...” (Gen. 1.28).*

After the flood God said to Noah and his family: *'Be fruitful and replenish the earth. The animals in the wild, the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea will feel fear of you. They are in your power. Everything that lives and moves, I give it you and will serve you as food. (Gen. 9:1-3)*

Man must toil, not only because the Creator has commanded it, but also because the maintenance and development of his human being requires labour. Work appears as a moral obligation for the neighbour who primarily is his own family but also the society to which he belongs.

Jesus condemns the behaviour of the lazy servant who buries his talent. (Mt 25.14-30) and praises the faithful servant who performs the tasks entrusted to him. (cf. Mt 24.26) Man is not only a nullity. He is also great, since he is tasked to practice stewardship of the things.

## **3 Think on further generations: sustainability.**

The Bible has more to say. Human responsibility extends over a long time, it includes the coming generations. The Israelites got the Promised Land from God as a legacy they must preserve and pass onto their children.

Of that legacy, they do not own: they have only temporary usufruct. The people of God get the country to pass it on to future generations, because the earth doesn't belong to anyone personally. It remains God's land. *"You are by me as foreigners and guests."* (Lev. 25: 23). We are the heirs of the work of the generations and at the same time we are editors of the future of those who will come after us (Social Law of the Church 256).

These primordial Biblical thoughts became commonplace and is the central theme in the ecological debate: the earth and the seas belong also to future generations. We do have them fully at our disposal. They are a feudal estate, received by inheritance and transferred to those who come after us. We are heirs (acquired) and testators (to pass).



Native American tribes came together to discuss and plan for the future, taking into careful consideration up to seven future generations. They divided the fertile plains among themselves and would not kill more bison than necessary. Such meetings were not without fierce and in-depth discussions. In any case they did not disperse until they had made decisions: decisions that they considered to be "sacred" and to be respected unconditionally, because they were the keys to ensure their future.

We can learn much from "primitives".

Fishermen are also concerned about future generations. They obviously wish that their boat, in which they made significant investments, could pass from father to son. They also face a latent crew shortage. Many European countries don't have a qualified crew reserve. In European fishery the concept of sustainability has gradually penetrated the consciousness. Sustainability is based on three pillars (PPP): People (people), Planet (planet), Profit (income). The three P's mean that we manage our planet in ways that ensure our grandchildren may make a healthy and safe living. In other words, fishing is a long-term business with an eye for the employee and for society, to make profits over a longer period and to minimize environmental impact. For the Western European fishing industry the major challenge is finding a balance between earning a living wage by, on one hand, selling fish and on the other hand careful management of resources so that future generations still have enough fish to catch.

Ship owners and fishermen come to the sea as their work floor, as a source of food for them to pass on to future generations, because it doesn't belong to anyone personally. She's fief, obtained by inheritance, to be transferred to future generations of fishermen.

#### **4 The Sabbath and a holy year for nature**

There are more references in the Bible (and applied practically by the Israelites) that teach that man is not an owner of the earth but rather has it on loan. For five thousand seven hundred years Judaism had the practice that seems to be one of the first forms of "sustainable development": the Sabbath. One day a week off work. We leave nature to rest and offer it back to its Creator.

Even in the desert, God taught his people to control themselves.

The same applies to the "sabbath year": the sabbath year was celebrated every seven year. Every seventh year the Israelites had to eat what was spontaneously produced by the land. After seven sabbath years came the Jubilee year. Then too, they couldn't work on the land, and all property was returned to the original owner. Clearly human property was temporary. In this way they avoided increasing impoverishment and realized that everything was received from God. "(Lev. 25, 10)

That the earth must rest was not an economic consideration. There is no complaint of yield



loss. It's just about respect for nature. Here is a real environmental concern, focusing on our involvement. Here's just the joy of harmony between man, animals and plants. All praise and thank God together as a big brotherhood.

Isn't it a Biblical hint for the policy makers in the fishery? Let fishermen rest on Sunday! Give some fish grounds rest for a period.

Let's say it again: the Biblical regulations for a holy year didn't have economical considerations. Nowadays, in our European fishing industry, it is severe economic pressure that drives the logistics of long sea voyages lasting many days, working on Sundays, etc.

### **5. Good stewardship puts the man back on the road to paradise**

The whole Bible is telling us that the fate of the planet depends of man's moral behaviour. Adam had already experienced that his disloyalty to God's command laid him under a curse. The same applies to the flood. It was the flooded earth that paid the price for the immoral behaviour of the people. And when Israel stood at the gates of the Promised Land, God spoke and said: "*...the people of the land, who were before you, did all of these abominations, so that the land became unclean), lest the land vomit you out when you make it unclean, as it vomited out the nation that was before you. For everyone who does any of these abominations, the persons who do them shall be cut off from among their people.*" (Lev. 18:27vv)

There is a link between Israel's moral behaviour and the land on which it may reside. The people promised to manage the earth in accordance with God's Law. Israel could be great if it was obedient to what God asked (and still asks). The prosperity of our European fishery will grow if it treats seafood according God's will. Unfaithfulness to God has cosmic implications.

Since God's command after the Fall, man is called by God to manage the earth. Good stewardship puts man back on the road to paradise: towards the new earth, the new heaven and the new cosmos.

### **Europe**

Twenty years ago Europe encouraged the owners to make substantial investments. The owners used governmental subsidies to build new and larger vessels with energy-guzzling engines. Everything revolved around economics. Ecology was hardly noticeable. But due to natural phenomena, such as scorching hot summers, unprecedented storms and hurricanes, global warming, floods, and due to environmentalists, such as Al Gore, the ecology called for attention.

It caused a tsunami in the minds of European policymakers. The CFP (Common Fisheries Policy), under pressure from the Green Parties and their continued lobby, made a shift of 180°.

We must be honest: from a Christian point of view this isn't a bath case.



Europe launched a Green Paper with advice for each member state. The states were to have translated these advices into an operational program with a 'Strategic Plan'. Our question here must be: does the Bible, the church, participate in the ecological debate? In the view of the Church, we first of all have to focus on changing the way fishers think about the environment. But from experience we know it takes a lot of time, a generation of fishermen, to change attitudes.

The cabin boys in our fishery schools now have an ecological awareness. But older people often have no affinity to ecological matters. Yet they have to comply with the new rules. If we had the possibility to start with a totally young crew it would be easier to succeed in our goals. But the reality is different: more often than not the cabin boy goes to work with an older crew with fixed ideas on the subject. On his own he is not able to change their thinking. Yet it is a matter of "perseverance".

Europe needs a sustainable, selective and environmentally responsible fishing industry.

- Sustainable (durable) goals fulfil the present needs without harming the future generations.
- Selective goals take into account to fish only mature fish in an amount that allows the reproduction of the species. So, small fish must have the opportunity to pass through the fishing nets.
- Ecologically justifiable goals invest in technology that helps to reduce the use of fuel, the soil disturbance, and the fish discards at sea.)

Of late the fishermen are challenged not only by the regulations of Europe, but also by the consumer himself. The consumer wants labelled fish (fish trading with certification). They want traceable food (where caught, when and by which ship?). Large firms want to buy ethically caught fish. Fishermen must pay attention to animal welfare and the quality rules about the treatment of fish on board, and other.

This has the effect that our owners and crews have a lot of stress, which affects the welfare of their families. They are also faced with all sorts of restrictions, so they experience more difficulties concerning the operation of the vessels, such as: fewer days at sea per year, closure of fishing grounds, the demarcation of exclusive marine areas where fishermen are banned, shifting to other fishing grounds demanding more fuel, continuous monitoring via the black box (site control), a complete traceable way of the fish on board by 15 cameras and a constant monitoring of the catch volume, annual percentage reductions in national and individual quotas, an increase of the control that the fishermen themselves have to pay, etc.

This is the main reason why so many companies in Western Europe have gone bankrupt and were bought by other countries.



## **Our attitude towards ecological fundamentalists**

They accuse our fishermen of being the ‘killers of the sea’. Since the prophetic film by Al Gore, everyone is concerned about the environment. A green spirituality has developed at the heart of Europe. It has grown in influence, and their policies are becoming more prominent.

When the traditional Christian religions crumble, non-Christian religions arise with apocalyptic considerations and messianic expectations. This is followed by some fundamentalist claims.

The so-called Deep Ecology have deified nature. Nature is much bigger and more important than man. Trees, rocks, animals and fish have inviolable rights: “Their rights are more important than the rights of men.” The “religious ecology” was born. People, including fishermen, must therefore be ashamed of what they do to nature. It’s an “ecological fever” to repair everything natural. Therefore it is inevitable that fishermen are considered as the murderers of the sea.

How can we teach our fishermen to deal with this image?

Fishers isolate themselves from open society. That’s wrong. Rather than cry with the wolves, fishermen must defend themselves and be more open. They have to attempt to enter into honest dialogue with the media and citizens who have gradually developed a distorted view of the sea life. We must tell our fishermen that the philosophy of Deep Ecology is a bridge too far and not Biblical. Christian faith acknowledges how valuable both nature and humanity are.

We must praise the environmental efforts of our fishers:

- They invested in fuel efficient engines in return for power and quotas.
- Ships were taken out of the fleet and demolished.
- There are many measures taken by faster network technologies, mesh sizes to dredges the discards and reduce air pollution.
- The SumWing (a kind of underwater wing reduces pressure on the seabed) are used as an alternative to beam to soil disturbance and fuel consumption. Etc.

We can’t make it clear enough that nature lovers, scientists, fishermen and the policymakers are not competitors, but ‘partners’.

I’d like to end with a wish that all these Biblical considerations concerned with fishing can strengthen our pastoral approach to fishermen and their families.

The text above will certainly be completed when the environmental measures, proposed by the EU, will be worked out during 2013.

Dirk Demaeght, Apostleship of the Sea, Belgium