

# Ecology: Key to teaching young people about Christian morality

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI believes ecology could hold the key to teaching young people about Christian morality.

The papal intuition is sparked by the fact that ecology is a widely accepted moral concern, but one that points much deeper: Nature itself teaches that some things are naturally right and some are naturally wrong.

Appropriately, Pope Benedict had Alpine peaks and meadows as a backdrop when he added the environmental twist to his oft-repeated call for a moral education of the young based on a recognition of natural law.

When a priest in northern Italy asked him July 24 for suggestions on how to educate the moral conscience of the young, the pope began with a rather philosophical explanation of conscience and natural law.

In the Christian view, the natural moral code is not an arbitrary list of do's and don'ts thought up by religious leaders or resulting from a majority vote, but is part of human nature and the result of being created by God, the pope said. Humans are special creatures precisely because they have the ability "to listen to the voice of the Creator and, in this way, know what is good and what is bad."

In helping people understand the natural moral law, the pope said, the first step is to help them recognize that within themselves there is "a moral message, a divine message, which must be deciphered" and obeyed.

More concretely, "I would propose a combination between a secular way and a religious way, the way of faith," he said, before launching his new idea.

"Everyone today can see that man could destroy the foundation of his existence - his earth - and, therefore, we can no longer simply use this earth, this reality entrusted to us, to do what we want or what appears useful and promising at the moment, but we must respect the inherent laws of creation," the pope said.

People must "learn these laws and obey these laws if we want to survive," he said.

The destruction of the environment, the pope said, is a stark example of how future survival requires that people obey the laws of nature, especially when everyone else is taking shortcuts that may increase their pleasure at the moment, but are obviously damaging in the long term.

The first thing young people can learn is that “our earth speaks to us, and we must listen if we want to survive,” the pope said.

Pope Benedict said it might not be that great of a reach to help young people understand that the same natural voice telling them littering is bad, clear-cutting a forest is a shame, and that water and clean air are precious resources is really saying that life is precious.

“We must not only care for the earth, but we must respect one another,” he said. “Only with absolute respect for this creature of God, this image of God which is man, only with respect for living together on this earth can we move forward.”

Pope Benedict said that once people understand human freedom involves the entire human community and not just what one individual feels like doing at any one time they can be led to see how the Ten Commandments also are expressions of truth about human nature and about the regulations needed for living together on this earth.

The pope said priests should try to use “the obvious paths” opened up by secular moral concerns, such as ecology, to lead Christian young people to “the true voice of the conscience,” which is communicated in Catholic moral teaching.

“Through a journey of patient education, I think we can all learn to live and to find true life,” he said.