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High-tech world plagued by ethical, economic misery, cardinal says at Vatican sustainability summit

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The future of humanity depends on economic policies that protect the environment, support human dignity and promote justice, said several participants at a Vatican symposium.

People need to understand the severe consequences of degrading and outstripping the world's natural resources and to take responsibility for reversing the damage, said Bishop Marcelo Sanchez Sorondo, chancellor of the two pontifical academies hosting the workshop.

The pontifical academies of Sciences and Social Sciences brought together dozens of scientists, economists and theologians at the Vatican May 2-6 to discuss "Sustainable Humanity, Sustainable Nature: Our Responsibility."

The workshop was meant to help address the "failure" of the U.N. Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, said the event's program. The 2012 summit aimed to find solutions for controlling climate change, to craft a new kind of global governance and to build a new model of civilization.

In a statement [1] emerging from the summit, the 27 signatories said humanity has entered a new era where technological advances has placed it at a crossroads.

"Human action which is not respectful of nature becomes a boomerang for human beings that creates inequality and extends what Pope Francis has termed ?the globalization of indifference? and the ?economy of exclusion? (*Evangelii Gaudium*), which themselves endanger solidarity with present and future generations," they wrote.

[**Read the full statement here [1]**]

The introduction in the Vatican written program [2] said that what was lacking at the summit was collaboration between natural and social scientists, who could define and determine the best ways to provide essential human needs while working within "nature's constraints."

Today's environmental, economic and political crises are all grounded in "a disruption of principles," Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga, president of Caritas Internationalis, said in his address [3].

"Man finds himself to be a technical giant and an ethical child," armed with sophisticated tools and the knowledge of "how" to get what he wants, but lacking any clear moral sense of for what ends, his text said.

Sciences, technologies and economics that objectify everything in their paths have led to a broken bond between humanity and nature, and between people, he wrote.

"The current capitalist system cannot, on account of its very essence, attain sustainable development, as it engenders and feeds on inequity and social injustice, and is based on the unbridled and predatory use of natural

resources, the anarchic production of goods" and the push for over-consumption as a way to reap in profits, the cardinal said in his text.

Joseph E. Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, condemned the chronic economic and social inequality plaguing the United States and many other countries that have modeled their policies on the United States.

"America has been 'winning' the race to be the most unequal country" in the world, among developed nations, he wrote.

Stiglitz, a professor at Columbia University and a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, said in his text that sharp inequalities in income and opportunities are major factors contributing to "weak economies and low growth."

The good news is "inequality is largely a result of policies -- what we do and don't do," rather than something inherent to the laws of economics, he said in his text.

However, the trickle-down theory "has been thoroughly discredited," he wrote, even though "it would be nice if it were true, because it would mean that the average American would be doing very well today, since the country has thrown so much money at the top."

"Every aspect of our economic, legal and social frameworks helps shape inequality," he wrote.

He cited the crafting of policies and laws as ways "that help enrich the top at the expense of the rest": policies that determine how education is financed; anti-trust, tax and bankruptcy laws; the financial and health care systems; and corporate governance.

Such a "failed economic system" will never turn itself around, he wrote.

There is no one cure-all, and policies need to cover a wide gamut: insuring investment in public infrastructure; support for education; an increase in the minimum wage; giving workers a stronger voice; enforcing anti-discrimination laws; improving corporate governance; regulating the finance sector and providing a fairer tax system, among other things, he wrote.

Rodriguez Maradiaga said in his address that there needs to be a "culture of sustainability," in which each person sees nature as "an extension of man himself, who lives on this planet as our hearts live inside our bodies."

He cited a need for "an education on environmental values that encourages a culture of vitality, healthiness, respect and responsibility," which also teaches people to understand and embrace their responsibility for the planet and all its inhabitants.

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