Open Hearts | Open Minds
How can we dialogue when we disagree about the state of the environment?

From the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World at Vatican II:

92 In virtue of its mission to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel and to gather together in one spirit all women and men of every nation, race, and culture, the church sows itself as a sign of that amity which renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it.

Such a mission requires us first of all to create in the church itself mutual esteem, reverence, and harmony, and to acknowledge all legitimate diversity; in this way all who constitute the one people of God will be able to engage in ever more fruitful dialogue, whether they are pastors or other members of the faithful. For the ties which unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them: let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything! (italics mine)


St John XXIII has taught us how to dialogue with charity! Now Pope Francis calls us to a great and vital dialogue about the care of our common home, the earth and its people. But how can we talk together if we disagree? Here are some principles to help us.

1. Always begin in prayer. As we gather to discuss, plan, and talk together about our earth as a common home for us all, let us do so being conscious of the presence of Christ. It is in Christ that the entire universe holds together. If we turn our hearts to Christ, we will be able to proceed in peace.

It’s important to remember that, as people of faith, we are all seeking what God wants which may or may not always be what we think we want. How do we surrender ourselves to the will of God in difficult questions and seek a broader, divine perspective?

2. Let us seek to find those values, virtues, beliefs, and practices on which we all agree and let us have unity in that. When disagreement arises, list those principles that all present have in common. This will lead to common ground.

3. Let us remember that disagreement does not equal conflict. Let’s allow disagreements when they occur and let them lead us to discussion and learning. Learning about an opinion or perspective different from our own will broaden each of our understandings of an issue.

1 John XXIII, Encyclical Ad Petri Cathedram, June 29, 1959, p 513.
4. Let us avoid judging one another. And let us avoid characterizing each other with labels such as liberal, conservative, or indifferent. Such labels are the result of judgments. Let charity and kindness prevail in our discussions. Do not allow our conversation to degenerate to us picking apart each other's personal values and beliefs.

5. Let us express our disagreements respectfully. When someone makes a statement with which we do not agree, there are various ways to express our point of view. It almost never works to say, in so many words, “Well, you’re just wrong and that’s all there is to it.” Let us remember that even in difficult and apparently clear moral issues, there can be differing points of view. We want our dialogue to help all of us grow closer to the teaching of the church, not to alienate one another.

Instead of rejecting one another’s points of view, let’s try something like this:

† Well, very interesting. It seems we have different points of view. Do you mind if I explain where I’m coming from?
† I've made different observations than you have so let’s compare the sources of what we believe and seek common ground.

6. Let us have open minds and open hearts in our dialogue with each other. Let us ask one another about how each of us arrived at our point of view. We may find that the experiences of others can shed light on our own beliefs. Asking open questions and listening actively will be the best possible way to find out what each of us knows and it can give all of us a breather from any current disagreements.

7. Let us always be aware that, at the table with us in dialogue, are people who have had life experiences that differ from ours. The choices and pathways they have followed up to this point inform their current thinking. Let us not reject or condemn others, even if we disagree with them fundamentally. Let’s consider instead expressing our understanding of a particular issue by explaining our own past experience. Of course, this must be a genuine connection; don’t make up anything.

8. In our discussions, let us seek common ground even with those with whom we disagree. We often focus on where we disagree with others, even if we agree 99% of the time! Understanding our common ground can help us focus on how we can best work together.
9. Paraphrasing St John XXIII, in our dialogue, then, let us have unity in the essentials and fundamentals of our belief:

† God is the creator of the earth
† It is given to us to till and keep, not to dominate and exploit
† It is meant for everyone, not for a few rich
† Our task is to care for it now so we can pass it on to the next generation
† People and their needs, especially the poor, are more important than profit
† Small steps we can all take every day have a great impact when we all do it together
† and others...

Let us have freedom in what is doubtful about this situation:

† How to create a more equitable distribution of the world’s good, especially food and especially for the benefit of the poor
† How to assist the poor without creating dependency among them
† Who has the vision to lead the world down a path toward greater sustainability in lifestyle and greater solidarity with the poor
† In what ways can the people of the wealthy nations make changes in order to include the poor, without destroying the world economy
† and others...

And let us have charity in everything:

† In our attitudes toward each other, even those in political or religious groups with whom we disagree
† In how we think about others and why they are suffering, poor, sick, illiterate, or without homes
† In our daily decisions about how much to consume, waste, purchase, or hoard
† In our public policy toward the earth
† In our business decisions, especially when profit is at stake and is sought before human rights, values, and comfort
† and others...

10. The bottom line. We need to keep good perspective on the core values that we share as Christians and Catholics. These core values will help us gain a good set of “perspectacles,” a new way of seeing through eyes of faith.

Pope Francis is calling on us to put people before profit, to share the earth’s bounty, to care for creation as though it were our own backyard, and to pass on to the next generation the beauty and gracious of God’s gifts to us.