

## Renewing the Earth

[from the U. S. Catholic bishops' 1991 pastoral statement on the environment, [www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.htm](http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp/bishopsstatement.htm)]

At its core the environmental crisis is a moral challenge. It calls us to examine how we use and share the goods of the earth, what we pass on to future generations, and how we live in harmony with God's creation.

A distinctively Catholic contribution to contemporary environmental awareness arises from our understanding of human beings as part of nature, although not limited to it. Catholics look to nature, in natural theology, for indications of God's existence and purpose. In elaborating a natural moral law, we look to natural processes themselves for norms for human behavior.

Nature is not, in Catholic teaching, merely a field to exploit at will or a museum piece to be preserved at all costs. We are not gods, but stewards of the earth.

Christian responsibility for the environment begins with appreciation of the goodness of all God's creation. The earth is a gift to all creatures. People share the earth with other creatures. But humans, made in the image and likeness of God, are called in a special way to cultivate and care for it. Men and women therefore, bear a unique responsibility under God: to safeguard the created world and by their creative labor even to enhance it. Safeguarding creation requires us to live responsibly within it, rather than manage creation as though we are outside it. The human family is charged with preserving the beauty, diversity, and integrity of nature, as well as with fostering its productivity. Yet, God alone is sovereign over the whole earth. Humanity stands responsible for ensuring that all nature can continue to thrive as God intended.

The tradition of Catholic social teaching offers a developing and distinctive perspective on environmental issues. The following themes are integral dimensions of ecological responsibility.

### ▪ **A God-centered and sacramental view of the universe grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth.**

The Christian vision of a sacramental universe—a world that discloses the Creator's presence by visible and tangible signs—can contribute to making the earth a home for the human family once again. Reverence for the Creator present and active in nature, moreover, may serve as ground for environmental responsibility. For the very plants and animals, mountains and oceans, which in their loveliness and sublimity lift our minds to God, by their fragility and perishing likewise cry out “We have not made ourselves.” God brings them into being and sustains them in existence. It is to the Creator of the universe, then, that we are accountable for what we do or fail to do to preserve and care for the earth and its creatures. Dwelling in the presence of God, we begin to experience ourselves as part of creation, as stewards within it, not separate from it. As faithful stewards, fullness of life comes from living responsibly within God's creation. Stewardship implies that we must both care for creation according to standards that are not of our own making and at the same time be resourceful in finding ways to make the earth flourish. It is a difficult balance, requiring both a sense of limits and a spirit of experimentation.

### ▪ **A consistent respect for human life extends to respect for all creation.**

The diversity of life manifests God's glory. Every creature shares a bit of the divine beauty. The wonderful variety of the natural world is, therefore, part of the divine plan and, as such, invites our respect. Accordingly, it is appropriate that we treat other creatures and the natural world not just as means to human fulfillment but also as

God's creatures, possessing an independent value, worthy of our respect and care. By preserving natural environments, by protecting endangered species, by laboring to make human environments compatible with local ecology, by employing appropriate technology, and by carefully evaluating technological innovations as we adopt them, we exhibit respect for creation and reverence for the Creator.

- **A Christian world view affirms the ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good.**

Ecological concern has now heightened our awareness of just how interdependent our world is. Some of the gravest environmental problems are clearly global. The universal common good can serve as a foundation for a global environmental ethic.

- **An ethics of solidarity promotes cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community.**

The universal common good is specified by the duty of solidarity, "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good," a willingness "*to lose oneself* for the sake of others instead of exploiting them." Solidarity requires sacrifices of our own self-interest for the good of others and of the earth we share. Solidarity places special obligations upon the industrial democracies. Only with equitable and sustainable development can poor nations curb continuing environmental degradation and avoid the destructive effects of the kind of overdevelopment which has used natural resources irresponsibly.

- **An understanding of the universal purpose of created things requires equitable use of the earth's resources.**

God has given the fruit of the earth to sustain the entire human family without excluding or favoring anyone. In moving toward an environmentally sustainable economy, we are obligated to work for a just

economic system which equitably shares the bounty of the earth and of human enterprise with all peoples. Created things belong not to the few, but to the entire human family.

- **An option for the poor gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world.**

The ecological problem is intimately connected to justice for the poor. The poor of the earth offer a special test of our solidarity. The painful adjustments we have to undertake in our economies for the sake of the environment must not diminish our sensitivity to the needs of the poor at home and abroad. The poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering. Environmental progress cannot come at the expense of workers and their rights. Solutions must be found which do not force us to choose between a decent environment and a decent life for workers.

- **A conception of authentic development offers a direction for progress which respects human dignity and the limits of material growth.**

Unrestrained economic development is not the answer to improving the lives of the poor. Authentic development supports moderation and even austerity in the use of material resources. It also encourages a balanced view of human progress consistent with respect for nature. Furthermore, it invites the development of alternative visions of the good society and the use of economic models with richer standards of well-being than material productivity alone. Authentic development also requires affluent nations to seek ways to reduce and restructure their overconsumption of natural resources. Finally, authentic development entails encouraging the proper use of both agricultural and industrial technologies.

**The Goodness of Creation and the  
Universal Destination of Created Goods**  
[from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*]

Creation is the beginning and foundation of all God's works. #198

Creation is the foundation of all God's saving plans, the beginning of the history of salvation that culminates in Christ. #280

Creation is the common work of the Holy Trinity. #292

The world was made for the glory of God. St. Bonaventure explains that God created all things "not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it." #293

Because creation comes forth from God's goodness, it shares in that goodness—"And God saw that it was good...very good." #299

Creation has its own goodness and proper perfection, but it did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created "in a state of journeying" toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it. #302

Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things which would be in contempt of the Creator and would bring disastrous consequences for human beings and their environment. #339

There is a solidarity among all creatures arising from the fact that all have the same Creator and are all ordered to his glory. #344

God speaks to man through the visible creation. The material cosmos is so presented to man's intelligence that he can read there traces of its Creator. Light and

darkness, wind and fire, water and earth, the tree and its fruit speak of God and symbolize both his greatness and his nearness. #1147

The right to private property, acquired or received in a just way, does not do away with the original gift of the earth to the whole of mankind. The universal destination of goods remains primordial, even if the promotion of the common good requires respect for the right to private property and its exercise. #2403

"In his use of things man should regard the external goods he legitimately owns not merely as exclusive to himself but common to others also, in the sense that they can benefit others as well as himself." The ownership of any property makes its holder a steward of Providence. #2404

Those who hold goods for use and consumption should use them with moderation, reserving the better part for guests, for the sick and the poor. #2405

Political authority has the right and duty to regulate the legitimate exercise of the right to ownership for the sake of the common good. #2406

Animals, like plants and inanimate beings, are by nature destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity. Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation. #2415

Those responsible for business enterprises are responsible to society for the economic and ecological effects of their operations. #2432