

## "Care for the Earth"

A Year of Jubilee! A year of praise and thanksgiving to God. A year of charity, justice, and peace toward all humankind. A year in which to reflect seriously and honestly about how we reverence and care for the gifts of creation for which we praise and thank God. A year that will be the beginning of a new appreciation of creation and a new vision and ethics of care for God's people and God's Earth. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth." (St. Francis of Assisi)

### **(1) Urgency of the message**

The environment, no---our environment, our home---is in crisis. Every summer we read about global warming and holes in the ozone layer; air and water pollution are in the news year round; piles and piles of waste accumulate; and the loss of arable land in our country and of forests worldwide accelerates. Biologists also tell us that, of the major episodes of extinction in the history of life on Planet Earth, the current rate of extinction exceeds previous records and this one is the first that is due to human activity.

To the preceding list of woes the Holy Father adds that "In our day, there is a growing awareness that world peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts, and continued injustice among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature..." (The Ecological Crisis [EC], #1). We are the cause, and we can participate in the solution: "Even as humanity's mistakes are at the root of earth's travail today, human talents and invention can and must assist in its rebirth and contribute to human development" (NCCB, *Renewing the Earth* [RE], p. 11).

Ordinarily, to say that something is everyone's responsibility leads to wholesale abdication of responsibility, but here it is literally and indubitably true: "Today, the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone" (EC, #15). This is not utopian posturing but straight scientific and ethical talk. "A just and sustainable society and world are not an optional ideal, but a moral and practical necessity" (RE, p. 14). A vital concern!

### **(2) The moral situation**

The fact that the problems listed in the previous section are due to human action necessarily places all of these issues in the domain of morality. The ecological problem is a moral problem:

The web of life is one. Our mistreatment of the material world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human. (RE, p. 2)

Read that quotation again. Harming the environment is action that disfigures us, that erodes the human dignity of those who do it!

## **(2.1) What Scripture tells us**

"God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman, and only then could he rest from all his work" (EC, #3). Men and women are called to be stewards or trustees of God's good and beautiful creation, to use intelligence and will to care for and to cultivate this Earth for all its creatures. As co-creators called to represent the Creator on Earth, we must reverence and not pervert or corrupt the order God established therein. The Old Testament, especially in the voices of the prophets, time and again shows how human sinfulness perverts the order in nature.

The New Testament includes nature in the redemption achieved by Jesus the Christ. Jesus exhibited both the power of God, in calming storms and raising the dead, and the loving care that the Father has for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Jesus took the bread which Earth has given and the fruit of the vine and changed them into his Eucharistic presence among us. And his risen and glorified body shows us the destiny of matter in the new creation that has already begun but not yet reached fullness.

## **(2.2) Moral theology and ecology**

Catholics have a sacramental vision of the universe. Water, oils, bread and wine are channels through which the grace of God is communicated to us. But that is a superlative moment in a more general vision: all creation we see as the work of God, and the universe reveals to us the glory of its Creator. Thus reverence for life and for the vast universe we've come to know is a fundamental Christian moral attitude.

In past and current socio-political debates in our country---abortion, child-care, quality of life for the marginalized, capital punishment, euthanasia---Catholics have worked out and clearly presented to our fellow citizens a consistent ethic based on the inviolable dignity of each and every human being on this planet. What we need to do now is extend a similar dignity to all God's creatures and to the whole Earth. Our ethic for the twenty-first century---our Jubilee ethic---must incorporate respect for all life.

The scriptural preferential option for the poor is likewise involved in ecological issues. The poor suffer twice. They suffer from the problems---pollution seems to get cleaned up, or is prevented in the first place, where the privileged live---and the poor suffer from the alleged solutions which others apply to those problems. Fair treatment, meaning justice, of people and of the environment are connected, for "the poor" now includes other species of life. Moreover, it has been a basic principle of Catholic social justice for many years that the Earth and its resources are a common heritage for all the inhabitants of our planet.

## **(3) Principles for a Catholic contribution to ecological debates**

Respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial, or scientific progress. (EC, #7)

### **(3.1) Our role in creation**

Humans are part of creation, created from the earth, but also a very special part of creation, created in the image of God. "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" (RE, p. 6). In contemporary language, gifted with intelligence and will, we are entrusted with managing the Earth, our home and the home of many of God's other creatures. (Both ecology and economics derive etymologically from the Greek word for "household"---oikos.) The connected commitments to human dignity and to reverence for all creation call for intelligent balancing: we are to be neither victims, nor violators,... nor bystanders.

### **(3.2) An ethics of care for the Earth**

As care-takers of God's good creation, humanity on the threshold of the twenty-first century should indict itself for gross dereliction of duty or criminal negligence. The Earth is not being well cared for. We've not yet given more than lip service to the fundamental insight of both Scripture and ecology: the interconnectedness of God's good creation, the real linkages between human existence and the well-being of the rest of life on Earth. John Donne asserted that "No man is an island," but we now have a broader vision: "Humanity is not an island!" Justice---the virtue of giving what is due---obligates us to respect human dignity, globally and equally, and also to respect the whole of God's creation. Economic efficiency is a value, but its priority is lower than both of these aspects of justice.

The following five moral principles are solidly grounded in Catholic traditions and are urgently advocated as the basis for the intelligent and worshipful action that is needed to respond to our ecological crisis:

\*\* The basic attitude that we must adopt is reverence for an order in creation that doesn't come from us but from the Creator of the heavens and the earth. In Catholic moral theology and philosophy this has been the starting point of natural law ethics for centuries, but we need to expand this reverence, and this humility, to a broader range of application beyond respect for other people.

\*\* The variety of forms of God's creatures---biodiversity---is one of the gifts of the Creator that we must cherish. The Fathers and the theologians of the Church were convinced that the diversity of creatures was essential to show forth the glory of God: no creature can adequately reveal God to us but the great variety of created beings does better at this than any single species. Thus, if we cause the extinction of a species, we are diminishing the glory of the Creator.

\*\* The encyclicals of three recent Popes---John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II---have all reminded us of the principle of the universal purpose of the goods of the Earth. The common good is global! In commerce and politics humanity has finally learned economic and ecological interdependence, but we have not yet learned the moral lesson that the Creator intended the resources of the Earth for the nourishment and flourishing of all people, and indeed of all life on Earth.

\*\* To be even more explicit, the poor and the marginalized demand special attention, the Gospel's "preferential option for the poor." The ecological crisis is clearly a moral crisis, and that necessarily means, for followers of Jesus, that justice and love must be joined to scientific know-how in resolving any and all problems.

\*\* In summary, what we need to develop in more specific form is a holistic ethic of care for the Earth for the twenty-first century that joins together the demands of ecological stewardship, social justice, and world peace. We've accomplished this in the USA with regard to some of our own social issues; now we need to expand our moral vision to the scope of these global problems common to "all people that on Earth do dwell."

"The ecological crisis challenges us to extend our love to future generations and to the flourishing of all earth's creatures." (RE, p. 11)

#### **(4) Some specific concerns**

The first implication of the interconnectedness of the web of life is that problems cannot be isolated; they are no longer problems restricted to the rich or to the poor, or to rural versus urban setting---they are human and indeed life problems. Among urgent special concerns that affect all of us, our children and grandchildren..., are the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land and seas that produce our food. Food does not magically appear on the dining table, nor does it originate in the supermarket. It's produced by human work in intelligent and caring interaction with the resources of the Earth: "...we have this bread to offer, which Earth has given and human hands have made."

To be blunt, the food supply of the USA is in crisis. The most glaring symptom of this crisis is that the family farm is being condemned to financial failure through increasing debt, lack of equity, lowering market prices, and increasing operating expenses. Cardinal Mahony (USCC) and Bishop Burke (NCRLC) summarized both the situation and the Church's concern in a letter to Congress in May, 1999:

...the Catholic bishops have demonstrated their concern for the family farm for decades. We do so not out of some quaint notion of a bygone era, but out of genuine concern about food safety, abundance, affordability and, most importantly, sustainability. We have repeatedly argued that food production is unlike any other sector of the economy precisely because it is necessary for life itself.

A highly diversified system of agriculture is preferable to a concentrated one for a number of reasons. First, it enables many more people to make a living from the land. Second, it better insures diversity in plant and animal life, reducing the possibility of

some catastrophic disease or pest destroying herds or acreage. Third, a family farmer generally thinks of passing the farm on to future generations and often has a greater reverence for the land and interest in the community and its economic well-being. A corporation, on the other hand, has profit as its primary motive, has fewer ties to the community, and is less likely to make decisions in the long-term interest of the community. (USCC, "Action Alert!", 8-25-99)

The role of farming in the Midwest and the crisis in family farming strikes at the heart of Midwestern culture. It illustrates the systemic problems inherent in the ways humans currently function within the larger web of life.

The family farm crisis affects small towns, small businesses, and local markets. Centralization pressures have produced oligopolies, mega-mergers, that affect us all:

We lose a way of life.

We lose breadth in the range of choices in the marketplace.

We lose independence.

We lose in the quality of food.

The Catholic Bishops of the USA perceived this in 1986 and asserted the interconnectedness of farm and city in their pastoral letter Economic Justice for All:

[This] rural interdependence has value beyond the rural community itself. Both Catholic social teaching and the traditions of our country have emphasized the importance of maintaining the rich plurality of social institutions that enhances personal freedom and increases the opportunity for participation in community life... By contributing to the vitality of rural communities, full-time residential farmers enrich the social and political life of the nation as a whole. Cities, too, benefit soundly and economically from a vibrant rural economy based on family farms. (#235)

Indiana, in one sense, is more fortunate than some other states, because jobs in industry and other business do exist here. But there is clearly, indubitably, and increasingly a crisis of the family farm in Indiana. Current economic practices that make family farming fail include:

**\*\*Development:** Prime farmland is lost to construction: housing developments, malls, and industry.

**\*\* Pricing:** Independent farmers are extremely vulnerable to depressed market prices, yet experience higher prices for supplies, higher interest rates, and exorbitant premiums for health insurance.

**\*\*Debt:** Being in constant debt, family farmers have little or no equity, and banks (now merged with distant city banks) have foreclosed on farms even when all payments have been met.

**\*\*Income:** Independent farmers lose control over their own crops and livestock when forced to sell to agri-businesses.

**\*\*Stress:** Farming communities are understandably facing other human problems such as

depression, grief, despair, divorce...

\*\*Effects on Environment: The quality of air and water deteriorates. Mega-operations concentrate wastes in small areas, polluting groundwater and depleting water sources.

The Church has ample reason to speak on these issues, as is clear both from the ethics of care for the Earth outlined above and from the Church's prophetic obligation to speak on behalf of struggling minorities. Paradoxically, though, on these issues the majority has a vested interest in what happens to this minority!

We need to be better stewards of land and water. We need to support diversity and decentralization in food production. The goal is sustainable agriculture, simultaneously an ecological and a theological goal that calls for both smarter technology and more widespread inspiration from Benedictine and Franciscan spirituality.

## **(5) Conclusion**

We appeal to the Catholics of Indiana to give ear and heart and mind to these reflections. Rich and stimulating resources for further study of this Jubilee Ethic of "Care for the Earth" are found in the Appendix, and we have also suggested a variety of parish, family, and individual activities as follow-up to this letter. We all need to learn more about these issues, to pray more over our responsibilities, and then to act together to fulfill those responsibilities.

We all need to learn more about these issues. "An education in ecological responsibility is urgent: responsibility for oneself, for others, and for the earth" (EC, #13). This is not easy because we live in a complex world, and these issues are simultaneously ethical, scientific, economic, and political, as well as being fundamentally religious. But intelligence is the unique gift God gave us so we could be stewards of his creation. In our contemporary world experts in one area need to dialogue with experts in other areas. The basic attitude, however, is simple. As Archbishop Buechlein said in an article on "Catholic School Values" (America, 4/24/99), we need to learn and then to teach...

...respect for the material world that God has entrusted to our care as stewards of all creation. This value acknowledges that each of us has a right---and a duty---to care for our own property and possessions, but also for the great bounty we have received from God's goodness: the land we work, the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the food we eat (and share with others). (page 8)

We need to pray. Celebrate the goodness of the Creator and of creation in our liturgies. Mourn the hurts that we have inflicted on the Earth and its inhabitants. Beg for the gifts of the Spirit---for knowledge and wisdom about what to do, and for the new heart that will give us the will to change what needs to be changed in order to heal the Earth and to do justice.

After, yes after, learning and praying, we need to act---to join voices, talents, and forces on behalf of social and environmental justice. In keeping with the attitude of reverence

for God's work that has run all through this message, our appeal is made with full confidence in the presence of God's Spirit guiding us and working with us in these endeavors. In this confidence, we pray...

Send forth thy Spirit, Lord And renew the face of the earth.

## APPENDIX

### (1) Resources available

#### Primary

Pope John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* (12-8-89), USCC #332-9.

Catholic Bishops, USA, *Renewing the Earth* (1992), USCC #468-6.

#### USCC

##### *Kits for parishes:*

Let the Earth Bless the Lord, USCC #5-085.

Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation, USCC #032-X.

Renewing the Face of the Earth, USCC #766-9.

##### *A reader for study groups:*

"And God Saw That It Was Good": Catholic Theology and the Environment, USCC #5-089.

#### Other Catholic sources

"Project Farmhands" Rural Life Ministry, Diocese of Toledo, (419) 435-1543.

"Youth Ministry in Rural and Small-Town Settings" National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry. National Catholic Rural Life Conference: for membership and information, (515) 270-2634.

#### Books

DOWD, MICHAEL *Earthspirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*. Twenty-Third Publications, 1991. (\$7.95)

FRITSCH, ALBERT. *Renew the Face of the Earth*. Loyola University Press, 1987. (in print??)

SUZUKI, DAVID. *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature*. Toronto: GreyStone Books, 1997. (\$14.95)

WOLF, ROBERT. *An American Mosaic*. Oxford University Press, 1999. (\$17.95)

## Videos

"The Farmer's Wife" PBS Frontline. Call Independent TV Service: (415) 356-8383; or access <http://www.pbs.org/>. (\$47.00)

"Keeping the Earth: Religious and Scientific Perspectives on the Environment" (27 min.) Available via Union of Concerned Scientists, Two Brattle Square, Cambridge, MA 02238; (617) 547-5552.

Foundation for Global Community,  
<http://www.indianacc.org/tables/www.globalcommunity.org>

"The Living Land" (27 min.) (\$20)

"The Unfolding Story" (30 min.) (\$20)

"Water, Sacred and Profaned" (\$20)

## **(2) Activities for applying the "JUBILEE ETHIC" in the "Communities of Salt & Light" format**

The US Bishops have proposed the following framework for parish social ministry. Your first step may be to develop and convene a group in your parish (e.g., social concerns committee, social justice group) to organize, guide and foster the social justice ministry and outreach of your parish. Contact your diocesan social action office or Catholic Charities for resources and organizing assistance in implementing these suggested activities:

### Prayer and Worship

Publicly observe Feast Days (e.g., Sts. Isidore/Maria, St. Francis, St. Benedict) celebrating creation. Promote Rogation Days and harvesting celebrations of the land and the laborer. Hold ecumenical services that invite and involve the whole community. In Eucharistic prayers-bring forth the gifts of the community, of our labor, co-creation with God.

### Education

Ensure that the Catholic social teaching is an element of formation programs: RCIA, baptism, marriage, catechism---especially as related to rural/environmental subjects. Economic Justice for All - vertical integration, subsidiarity, multi-nationals, Freedom-to-Farm Stress caring use of resources-reduce, reuse/recycle, composting-"Care for Creation"

### Family, Work, Citizenship

Promote/provide youth and family activities that care for and rejoice in creation (e.g., trip to a farm, hiking, nature visits, litter clean-up) Support families who farm-with

counseling, support groups, prayer services Advocate for just wages/prices and fair contracts for people who give their lives to agriculture.

### Advocacy

Advocate for legislation that promotes the family and family farms through letter writing campaigns, phone calls, and visits with representatives. Host representatives' forum to discuss issues and show support for families and people who work the land. Involve the entire (ecumenical) community. Encourage people to participate in the political process.

### Charity and Outreach

Offer support structures for health care, education, basic needs for families, etc. Learn of what families are most in need (usually, and ironically, food), make it available, and advocate for laws which provide families with the necessities of life.

### Community Organizing

Foster and support cooperative associations and local marketing opportunities for farmers, since this achieves greater return from and participation in the production process. Strengthen the communal environment by promoting land use ordinances consistent with the principles of subsidiarity and the common good. Support and host existing organizations.

### Solidarity

Make Rural-suburban-urban links; we all exist in the same "web of life." Connect with others---visit for mass or church service; share a picnic; combine for youth projects; etc. Foster stewardship and kinship with creation--living in solidarity with each other and the land; plant and nurture a flower/vegetable garden; visit a botanical garden; sponsor nature hikes; etc.