

AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD

A Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of the Boston Province

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the Earth as we have in the past. . . A) new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge. . . The ecological crisis is a moral issue.

Pope John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, nos. 1, 15, December 8, 1989.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are increasingly aware of serious global, regional and local environmental concerns. Global warming, the loss of fisheries here in our region and across the globe, the destruction and overuse of forests and continuing problems of air and water pollution and human environmental health need our attention. We call upon the people in northern New England to take up the moral challenge of preserving the environment.

Any response must begin with a call for the conversion of hearts and minds that will reclaim the common vocation we all have as stewards of all God's creation. As our brother bishops have done in other regions of the United States and across the world, we invite the members of our local parishes to examine our behaviors, practices and policies as individuals, as families, as parishes and institutions, as workers and as corporations, for the effects of our actions on the environment. In this way steps can be taken to appreciate better care for God's creation and to contribute to its restoration and flourishing while ceasing to perform actions that could destroy this earthly home of ours.

Using the rich wisdom of the Scriptures and the social teaching of the Catholic Church, this letter, faithful to the many statements of the Holy Father on the environmental crisis, intends to respond to the call of our tradition always to protect the life and dignity of the human person. Every person lives in society and is, to a great extent, shaped and influenced by the worlds which make up our communities. It is increasingly clear that the promotion of human dignity cannot be separated from our care and protection of God's creation. Inspired by the example of St. Francis of Assisi whose Canticle sings God's praises for all the beauties of creation, we offer these thoughts for the faithful of our dioceses and for all our brothers and sisters of northern New England.

I. Biblical Basis

Catholics believe, as the Nicene Creed declares, "in God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." Humility is required before this creation, which was not and is not

ours to deplete or abuse at will. The earth is the Lord's creation. It is our responsibility to acknowledge this and to fulfill the proper role God has given us on this earth.

According to the Book of Genesis, creation has an order and beauty that are to be respected by all. In the first creation story, "God admires all that he has made and finds it good." (Gen. 1:3) When God calls the first humans into being, God finds them "very good". (Gen. 1:31) The first humans are uniquely made in God's own image and likeness and are charged to take dominion over all that God has made. (Gen. 1:26) To be made in God's image and likeness means, among other things, being called to cooperate with God in the care of his creation. To have dominion, far from being a license to exploit and use the earth for selfish purposes, is to accept a sacred trust given to all humans to be responsible stewards of all that God has made.

The story of Noah further illustrates our place in creation. God charges Noah to bring into the shelter of the ark not only his own family members, but also two of every creature on earth. (Gen. 7:16) When the flood recedes and God pledges that never again shall the earth be destroyed, God makes a covenant with all humankind. This covenant includes all creatures on this earth. (Gen. 8:21-22)

The dramatic conclusion of the Book of Job states powerfully the respective places of God and humans with regard to the universe. Speaking as creator to creature, God says to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements?" (Job 38:1-5)

In the Book of Psalms, which the Church prays constantly at Mass and in the liturgy of the hours, the psalmist gives voice to all creatures, invited to join in the praise of God. (Ps.48) In Psalm 8, God's creative action and dominion over all is proclaimed, while recognition is given that humans are made "little less than a god, crowned with glory and honor" and thus given dominion by God toward all creatures on this earth.

Jesus of Nazareth constantly made use of the beauty of creation to illustrate and underscore his message of salvation. The birds of the air and the lilies of the field were a reminder of God's providential care (cf. Mt 6: 25-34). The pruner of fruit trees and the manager of farms were examples of good stewards of God's creation and thus a reminder of the ways Jesus' followers should live their own spiritual lives (cf. Luke 13:6-9). This wisdom was to be gained as a gift of God by observing the lessons of nature (cf. Luke 21:29ff). Jesus used these examples to illustrate the wisdom of caring and of vigilance. He went further to show his followers the deeper significance of bread broken, wine shared and oil poured. He saw in the seed cast on the ground (Luke 8:11) a symbol of the Word of God searching for a response in faith. How often did he use fishing and the vicissitudes of work on the lake (Mark 1:16-20) to call the disciples not to be afraid and to be evangelizers. How prophetic then is the disciples' subsequent question which also is ours: "Who then is this whom even the wind and the sea obey?" (Mark 4:41)

Jesus frequently warned about the dangers from the attachment to wealth and the heedless acquisition of material possessions (Luke 12:15) He preached the blessings that

come to the poor (Luke 6:20). In the end, he said, each of us will have to render an account for all that has been entrusted to us (Matthew 25:14ff). In these ways Jesus opened up to us a new living based not upon consumption, but upon prudent use of the goods of this world with a special concern for the poor. Response to the poor and to those too often exploited ought today to include a new sensitivity to and a greater ecological consciousness of the current state of nature itself.

The Christian community, from the very beginning, was conscious that it was composed of women and men who are God's creatures, made in God's image, redeemed and made new by the salvific grace of Jesus Christ. Echoing Jesus' own prayer (Matthew 11:25), one of the earliest hymns found in Paul's letter to the Colossians acclaims Jesus, the Risen Lord as "the first born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). He is the new Adam who brings reconciliation, righteousness and grace. (cf. Romans 5: 10-21) Thus Christians, who from the beginning see the world as good because it is the fruit of God's creative love, now see it reconciled because through Christ God was pleased to "reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross". (Colossians 1:19). Christians then are "new creatures" (2 Corinthians 5:17) endowed with the "freedom of the Sons of God", a freedom that calls them to share in the renewal of the earth as the "first born in Christ Jesus". Paul magisterially sets forth the role of Christians as the "first born in Christ Jesus" in Romans 8. He describes the whole of creation as "groaning until now" until "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the sons of God". (Romans 8: 19-21) In this theological vision, Christians, as the "first born", have the task of directing creation to the ultimate goal of fulfillment. While that fulfillment is never totally accomplished in this world, we are called in hope to seek the completion that the Spirit will accomplish in us and through us.

The choice to be a good steward of creation will be one of the characteristics of Christians who know that theirs is not the final generation. Generation after generation will have to struggle to build the Kingdom of Christ until God establishes the final Kingdom. Until then, the good deeds of every faithful follower of Christ contributes to the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Among the "righteous deeds" that compose the "fine linen of the saints" (cf. Revelation 19:8) at the end of time will certainly be the good stewardship of this earth, the fruit of God's creative love.

II. Church Teaching

The Church's social doctrine finds its source in these Biblical insights. This social teaching makes use of both God's revelation and the wisdom born of human experience and reflection to propose principles or truths to be applied to the circumstances of life today. From this teaching the following principles have been developed, all of them relevant to the issues of the environment:

1. Respect for human life from the moment of conception to the time of natural death.

2. Respect for all of God's creation, heeding God's call to care for and be responsible for the goods of this world and its future.
3. The universal purpose of created things, for God intended the use of this world's goods for everyone, an intention that requires an equitable use of earth's resources.
4. Solidarity which sees the world not just as interdependent but as a place for mutual cooperation and collaboration as an ethical necessity for sharing this world's goods for the common good of all.
5. A concept of development which seeks the integral good of every person and the good of all, a vision that helps determine the proper use of the goods of this earth.
6. A preferential option for the poor, which, out of respect for the dignity of every human being, seeks to make the changes needed for an equitable and sustainable world.

Many others from Christian religious tradition have contributed to the needed public dialogue. One outstanding example of this is His All Holiness, Bartholomew I. The Ecumenical Patriarch has declared boldly, "To commit a crime against the natural world is a sin. For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for humans to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests, or destroying its wetlands; for humans to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air and its life with poisonous substances – these are sins." (Speech, University of California, Santa Barbara, November 1997)

III. New England Concerns

The New England landscape, which is so blessed with forests and lakes, seashore and mountains, is not merely an economic resource, but a window into the beauty of God revealed in what God has made. The very diversity of our New England landscape presents a variety of environmental challenges and opportunities for us and for future generations. New Englanders historically have had a tendency to feel independent of our neighbors in other parts of the country. That tendency must be subordinated to a commitment to cooperation based on the new realization that threats to the environment can only be met effectively by regional, national and even global cooperation.

Much has already been done. Today there is a pressing challenge on all New Englanders to face together the realities of the current ecological environment. There are environmental challenges from old mill town/industrial heritage (local air and water pollution, toxic waste/brownfield contamination); from the long sea coast (marine pollution, destruction of fisheries, loss of saltmarsh wetlands and cranberry bogs); from agriculture (loss of farmland, erosion of soils, ground and surface water pollutant contamination); from forests which so importantly define our region (overcutting, acid rain damage, loss of the aesthetic beauty and wilderness image which is increasingly important to our psychic well-being) and from the loss of our open spaces to residential and commercial sprawl.

In particular, there are two primary concerns in our region: agriculture and fisheries. In general, New England is not well endowed with great agricultural soils or potential. Family farmers and family farming are under stress. Work has to be done to protect the local food base and the local agricultural community if we want to ensure the health and continuance of our region's remaining farms. "Those who grow our food should be able to make a decent living and maintain their way of life." (Administrative Board, U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Faithful Citizenship*, 1999, p. 21)

While there is nothing in itself wrong with large-scale agri-business, its success is often at the expense of local, family-owned enterprises. Businesses controlled from afar by persons who do not know the local circumstances can more easily be tempted to introduce environmentally hazardous practices such as large-scale confined animal feeding operations. The balance between legitimate profit and sensitivity to the local situation is not easily maintained by agri-business and thus must be monitored carefully and examined for potential harmful effects.

Our region has had a strong and centuries-old fisheries' culture along coastlines which must be protected by investment in a safety net for coastal fishing families and their business as they weather a period of reduced or no catch. At the same time fish stocks must be protected so that they might recover and once again be a means to support these families.

From the cranberry bogs of eastern Massachusetts to the dairy farms of Vermont, from the great forests of Maine and New Hampshire to the fishing along our coasts, new efforts are needed to achieve balance between human needs and natural resources, between the right to make a decent living for self and family and the husbanding of resources for future generations. Ours is the task of applying the insights of our faith to these challenges for the good of all the people of northern New England and beyond.

IV. An Environmental Examination of Conscience: Invitation and Challenge

Responsibility for the protection of the environment requires mature moral evaluation and action. There are real dilemmas, issues and tensions that emerge as we reflect upon the environmental challenges before us. Legitimate land and natural resource development, for example, and the human right to a livelihood must be part of any moral assessment of how we preserve and protect our natural resources from further destruction. In pointing out how much more needs to be done, however, we must not neglect to show proper appreciation of all that has already been done to enhance the quality of our land, air and water.

As we do an environmental examination of conscience, certain behaviors and attitudes do emerge as needing dramatic change and conversion.

Although economic development is the key to our current prosperity, certain economic practices and an attitude of blind faith in economic growth contribute to environmental

destruction and urban sprawl. Economic criteria alone cannot be the basis for a proper evaluation of the effects our behavior has on the environment. Moral evaluation is needed and corrective measures must be taken where needed.

In a consumer society, personal habits of overconsumption and waste have adverse environmental and social impacts. While some of us consume more than we need, others do not have enough to sustain life. The waste and pollution we create and the challenge of equitably distributing the earth's resources are fundamental matters of environmental and social justice. The true costs of our common habits of material consumption must be examined. While the population of the United States is 4% of the world's population, our nation consumes almost 25% of the world's goods. Faced with this reality we should all reflect on the call of Pope Paul VI that it is more important "to be more than to have more".

In light of all this, we invite everyone, first of all, to thank God for the world He has given us and to rejoice in the beauty of God's own creation.

We invite our families to teach their children to love and respect the earth, to take delight in nature and to consider the long-range consequences of their attitudes and actions. We ask families to reflect this in their daily lives and in their habits of consumption.

We invite our priests and parishes to incorporate in their prayers and homilies our confessions of the misuse of nature and its resources. In our rededication to be good stewards, there are opportunities to organize occasional celebrations of creation on appropriate feast days. We suggest choosing those ecological themes that reflect the liturgical year.

We invite our parish leaders to become better informed about environmental issues and introduce them into religious education and other parish programs where appropriate.

We invite the Catholic media to explain and disseminate the Church's teachings on the environment, applying them to examples from everyday life. We suggest as well that they report parish environmental activities.

We invite the faculties of Catholic colleges and universities to accept a special responsibility to educate students about ecological concerns in the context of their faith. The contemplation of God's goodness as manifested in creation and a focus on Christian devotion to the care of the earth should become hallmarks of Catholic education.

We invite the business community to make further progress in accepting its responsibility to develop products and services that respect the integrity of creation and the responsible use of the resources of the earth.

We invite our public policy-makers and officials to review public policies and programs for their environmental impact, eliminating actions and policies which are harmful. We

urge support for economic development projects that protect better the environment and that consume fewer natural resources.

These invitations seek to challenge all of us to a public dialogue about the responsible use of natural resources and the overall impact our individual and collective behaviors have upon our environment.

Conclusion

The promise of the new heaven and a new earth lies at the heart of Christian hope. As faithful stewards, we can either enhance or contradict this promise through our behavior. Yet, if there is to be a future, if we are truly partners in shaping the promise of the New Jerusalem, the new City of Peace, we can do no other than to exercise responsible environmental stewardship. God gives us the courage to pray: Send forth thy Spirit, Lord, and renew the face of the earth.

October 4, 2000

Feast of St. Francis of Assisi

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