

**“You Love All That Exists... All Things Are Yours, God,  
Lover of Life...”<sup>i[1]</sup>**

**A Pastoral Letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative  
from the Social Affairs Commission,  
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops  
October 4, 2003  
Feast of St. Francis of Assisi  
(Patron Saint for Ecology)**

1. The beauty and grandeur of nature touches each one of us. From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine. Humans live within a vast community of life on earth. In the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, God is first described as the Creator who, as creation proceeded, “saw that it was good.”<sup>ii[2]</sup> God’s love for all that exists was wondrously evident then, remains so now, and invites the active response of humankind.
2. To enter into ever-deeper relationship with God - this “Lover of Life” - entails striving to develop right relations with nature and with other human beings. But life on earth today is plagued with an unprecedented and accelerating ecological crisis. Deforestation, species extinction, climate change, ecosystem collapse, contamination of air and water, and soil erosion are just a few of the enormous ecological problems which we face in Canada and elsewhere in our world. How many of us remember a childhood spent playing under the sun, a beach we were once able to swim at, a river we were once able to drink from – but no more! The closing of the once overwhelmingly bountiful cod fishery in Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador is a particularly painful example of this crisis. Indeed, every region has been affected in some negative manner. Environmental health concerns are frequent, arising from the Sydney Tar Ponds in Nova Scotia to urban smog alerts in Toronto or Montreal, from contaminated mine sites in northern Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories to the safety of food that every Canadian family will eat.
3. God’s glory is revealed in the natural world, yet we humans are presently destroying creation. In this light, the ecological crisis is also a profoundly religious crisis. In destroying creation we are limiting our ability to know and love God. “The ecological crisis is a moral issue” and “the responsibility of everyone,” says Pope John Paul II.<sup>iii[3]</sup> “Care for the environment is not an option. In the Christian perspective, it forms an integral part of our personal life and of life in society. Not to care for the environment is to ignore the Creator’s plan for *all* of creation and results in an alienation of the human person.”<sup>iv[4]</sup>

**A Religious Response**

*Praise be my Lord for our brother the wind,  
and for air and cloud, calms and all weather,  
by which you uphold life in all creatures.*

-St. Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Sun*

4. Throughout history, each people's religious beliefs have conditioned their relationship to their environment. Some Christians have developed the ecological acumen of saints. Others seem to have misinterpreted the Genesis account to "subdue" the earth and establish "dominion" over all living things. Pope John Paul II has emphasized the need for "ecological conversion,"<sup>v[5]</sup> and we are encouraged that many Christian traditions are responding actively to the ecological crisis. They have recognized that churches have insufficiently come to grips with how aspects of Christian theology and tradition are implicated in the Western capitalist development model which has led to so much ecological ruin<sup>vi[6]</sup> (not to mention the ecological disasters left by communist regimes). Christians are mining biblical and theological resources in order to gain insight into "eco-justice" issues. Others are collaborating by forming new ecumenical and interfaith alliances. The work to highlight a theology of creation that directs us towards the proper relationship between God and the entire earth community is most timely and appreciated, both within the churches and increasingly among environmental activists.<sup>vii[7]</sup>
  
5. All spiritual traditions speak of the marvels of the earth: the overwhelming beauty, the vast array of creatures, the complex and interconnected weave of ecosystems. They also teach respect for the earth and call humans to live within its limits. Certainly the Christian tradition has both biblical and theological resources that could deter humans from further ecological ruin. Biblical teachings are rich with ecological guidance and wisdom. The bible has abundant images that connect the earth to God, and teach about God; the wind, water, soil, seeds, trees, birds, sheep. Many passages speak of the need to respect the land, for example.<sup>viii[8]</sup> The metaphors of planting and tending, pruning and harvesting are used to speak of God and of life. The magnificent story of Job is a reminder that God loves and tends to all of creation.<sup>ix[9]</sup> The rainbow, set by God in the clouds, "recalls the Covenant between myself and you and every living creature of every kind that is found on the earth."<sup>x[10]</sup>
  
6. The bible also teaches about an equitable distribution of resources, including sharing land, animals and water. This insistence on justice is often directed towards distributing the bounty of the earth and providing for those who are marginalized.<sup>xi[11]</sup> The profound interconnection between God's care for humans and care for the environment is noted in Psalm 146, in which  

*The maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them ...  
secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry ...  
sets prisoners free ...  
gives sight to the blind ...  
raises up those who are bowed down ...*

*protects the stranger [and] sustains the orphan and the widow.*

Ecological problems are enmeshed within social structures that serve the interests of the few at the expense of the many, especially those marginalized and in poverty.

7. Christian theological and liturgical tradition affirms the biblical message. Creation and the redemptive Incarnation of the Son of God are inextricably linked. Through his Incarnation, Jesus Christ not only entered and embraced our humanity; he also entered and embraced all of God's creation. Thus all creatures, great and small, are consecrated in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This is why the Church does not hesitate to bless and make generous use of the earth's materials in liturgical celebrations and sacraments. This is also why, in Catholic social thought, the common good should be conceived as the sustenance and flourishing of life for all beings and for future generations.<sup>xii[12]</sup> The call for a "new solidarity" should take into consideration not only the economic needs of all people but also environmental protection in order to provide for all.<sup>xiii[13]</sup> The principle of the social mortgage on private property should include an "ecological mortgage" on the goods of creation (for this as well as future generations). The preferential option for the poor can be extended to include a preferential option for the earth, made poorer by human abuse.

### **Embracing Ecological Conversion - Living Water or Private Commodity?**

*Praise be my Lord for our sister water,  
which is very serviceable to us,  
and humble and precious and clean.*

-St. Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Sun*

8. Water is the source of all life, and a primary symbol in religious traditions. Water cleanses, purifies, refreshes and inspires. The bible speaks of living waters, of becoming a fountain of living water, of longing for running water, and of justice flowing as a mighty river. Yet how can anyone speak about the "waters of life" if these waters can no longer sustain life? As Thomas Berry writes, "if water is polluted it can neither be drunk nor used for baptism. Both in its physical reality and its psychic symbolism it is a source not of life but of death."<sup>xiv[14]</sup>
9. Without water everything dies. Water is the basic element through which all life forms emerged, exist and flourish. Water is the life-blood of the planet, and maintains an intricate and delicately balanced circulation system that has evolved for over four billion years. Water not only serves the common good, but is part of the common good.
10. Today, water is threatened almost everywhere on earth. Many water systems are over-saturated with contaminants and carcinogens. The diversion and damming of rivers has resulted in drought, and in deserts where lush ecosystems once thrived.

Ground water is diminishing and aquifers are mined. Bulk exports of thousands of gallons of freshwater are planned as if such ecological trauma would leave no negative footprint. These realities pose grave risks to human health and food security, as well as to the future of entire regions.

11. The world's fresh water resources are finite and are now becoming market commodities, no longer public goods. Currently, inadequate access to safe drinking water affects the well-being of over one billion people, and 2.4 billion persons lack access to adequate sanitation.<sup>xv[15]</sup> Some persons living in urban slums in poor countries are forced to pay between four and one hundred times more for water than their middle and upper class fellow citizens.<sup>xvi[16]</sup> No wonder that for persons living in poverty, water has become, in the broad sense of the concept, *a right to life issue*.<sup>xvii[17]</sup> The tragedy of seven deaths and thousands of illnesses in Walkerton, Ontario, as a result of a contaminated water system has brought this concept into the Canadian consciousness, as well.
12. One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs – which Canada is committed to achieving by 2015) is to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.<sup>xviii[18]</sup> The United Nations has declared 2003 the International Year of Freshwater. This is a propitious time for Christian communities to reflect on the meaning of water in our lives, the need to preserve it and safeguard its purity, and also to redefine how it is shared. Not only should every human person enjoy the right to a safe environment but, specifically, every person's right to water must also be respected.<sup>xix[19]</sup> Canada's bishops encourage all Canadians to sign the "Water Declaration" and to participate in the action campaigns of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace as a concrete way to advance these concerns.<sup>xx[20]</sup>
13. Such a basic human right as access to water cannot be left to the whims of market forces to deliver. In our own country, Canadians should insist on government action to ban bulk exports of water, exclude water services from international trade agreements, ensure high quality standards of drinking water for all and guarantee that water utilities remain public, rather than private entities. Campaigns such as that of the Franciscan Family of Quebec, which raise our attention to international trade agreements that threaten our ability to protect and preserve supplies of freshwater, are worthy of our support.<sup>xxi[21]</sup> Members of Christian communities, especially in Catholic schools, are encouraged to include education related to environmental issues, especially water, in their upcoming programs.

### **Embracing Forms of Eco-Justice**

14. All serious solutions to the ecological crisis demand that human beings change our thinking, relationships and behaviours in order to recognize the interconnectedness of all creation. In previous messages, the Social Affairs Commission suggested several pedagogical steps to assist communities to develop

social action.<sup>xxii[22]</sup> Today however, we must imbue this pastoral methodology with ecological sensitivity. For example, while beginning to listen to the experiences of the marginalized in society, we must also be attentive to the cry of the creation that surrounds and sustains them. Whereas we once began by developing critical analysis of economic, political and social structures that cause human suffering, we must now also bring the additional riches of ecological justice to bear on such realities. Our Christian tradition provides us with at least three inter-related forms of active response: the Contemplative, the Ascetic and the Prophetic.<sup>xxiii[23]</sup>

### **The Contemplative Response**

15. Each one of us is called to deepen our capacity to appreciate the wonders of nature as an act of faith and love. In the silence of contemplation, nature speaks of the beauty of the Creator. “If you look at the world with a pure heart, you too will see the face of God” (cf. Matthew 5:8).<sup>xxiv[24]</sup> Standing in awe of creation can assist us to perceive the natural world as a bearer of divine grace. Much can be done in the preparation of liturgy and meditation to include a renewed or deepened appreciation of nature that will sensitize us to the problems and encourage us to work for the solutions that our planet and future generations require.<sup>xxv[25]</sup>

### **The Ascetic Response**

16. Canadians are blessed with an abundance of natural resources, but we also are among the planet’s most excessively wasteful inhabitants. Thankfully, there is in our tradition an ascetic response through which we can confidently adjust our lifestyle choices and daily actions to respect ecological limits, attune us to solidarity with vulnerable peoples, as well as encourage the movement of grace in our lives. Rather than an attempt to “flee the world,” a new asceticism would enable us all to enter more deeply into the planetary rhythms of restraint from the demands of consumerism. To “fast” from actions that pollute, to embrace whatever inconveniences may arise from running a “greener” household, to decrease our use of fossil fuels and to tithe time, treasure and talent to environmental causes may all be aspects of this response. Buying locally produced goods, organic produce and fairly traded merchandise are increasingly realistic options for many Canadians. We can challenge the hold of the marketplace over our lives by conscious efforts to avoid over-consumption and by using our purchasing power to promote earth-friendly enterprises.

### **The Prophetic Response**

17. All social justice issues have ecological implications: the case of water is a perfect example of this. We can make the links between social and ecological justice more evident in our preaching and community action. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one.<sup>xxvi[26]</sup> Ecological harmony cannot exist in a world of

unjust social structures; nor can the extreme social inequalities of our current world order result in ecological sustainability.<sup>xxvii[27]</sup> But the growing movements for eco-justice can contribute substantially to the necessary solutions for both crises. Christian communities, inspired by St. Francis of Assisi – the friend of the poor who was loved by God’s creatures - should provide positive recognition and support to those environmentalists, farmers, educators and solidarity activists who have begun to show us the way forward.

## **Conclusion**

18. All of creation is of God, and is as yet unfinished. We are called as co-creators to join God’s work to repair some of creation’s wounds which have been inflicted due to our ecological sins. We are also called to creative actions of solidarity with those who have less access to the benefits of God’s bountiful creation. The “*Lover of Life,*” who came so that we all might have life, and have it abundantly,<sup>xxviii[28]</sup> continues to provide us with opportunities to renew the face of the earth. How can we not take up that challenge?

### **Members of the Episcopal Commission for Social Affairs**

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