

# Celebrate Life: Care for Creation

## The Alberta bishops' letter on ecology for October 4, 1998

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Last year, in our Easter message, we spoke of the necessity of choosing life in a society where too often human dignity is not respected and vulnerable human life is endangered. Today, on the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, we are issuing a call to celebrate life by caring for God's creation and responding to the ecological crisis that is manifesting itself all around us in so many ways.

Every day in the media we hear about new ecological problems. Climate change from global warming and the depletion of the ozone layer are changing the conditions for life over the whole planet.

In Canada, fish stocks on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts are endangered, presenting both an ecological and an economic crisis.

In Alberta, we are having to face the environmental costs of many years of large-scale logging often without adequate reforestation, inadequately planned resource development, industrial expansion and toxic waste disposal, and non-sustainable agricultural practices. The loss of parks, wilderness areas and other wildlife habitats poses an increasing threat to endangered species and brings about the loss of biodiversity.

Pope John Paul II, in his 1990 statement *Peace with All Creation*, reminds us that present practices cannot continue and that fundamental change is required: "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."

Hopeful initiatives are already emerging ranging from global treaties to eliminate ozone destroying chemicals to neighbourhood recycling organizations. Much more needs to be done, however, if future generations of our children and grandchildren are not to be saddled with a life-threatening environmental deficit.

Ecological crisis impacts on life, including human life. For Christians and all human beings, this must be a priority concern. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that "the seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation" (no. 2415). Pope John Paul II repeatedly emphasizes that ecological crisis must be seen as a spiritual and moral issue.

In order to understand and respond to this great challenge, we need to reexamine our fundamental values. As Christians, we need to step back and reflect on our place in the midst of all that God has created in such abundance and beauty.

## **Biblical Ecological Vision**

Genesis contains a clear and repeated message that creation, sun and stars, land and seas, animals and plants, is good in God's eyes. All creation is called to give praise to God (Daniel 3:35-68). Humans, very much part of God's creation, are created male and female in the image and likeness of God and have a special role and responsibility within creation. Humans are called to exercise dominion over the earth, a dominion of service, wisdom and love.

Another Genesis passage describes the task of women and men to be one of "cultivating and caring for creation" (Genesis 2:15).

Human sin results in the alienation of people from God, from each other and from the rest of creation. The prophet Hosea describes how as a result of greed and injustice "the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea perish" (Hosea 4:3). God's continuing love and concern for all creation is shown in the covenant God makes with Noah, with his descendants, and with all living creatures (Genesis 9:8-10).

The biblical Sabbath and jubilee (Leviticus 25) provide a model for an ecological ethic. Every seventh day, the people and their domestic animals were to refrain from work in order to celebrate the Sabbath.

Every seventh year, the people and the land were to rest and to be restored. During the jubilee year, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the land was to be restored to the original owners who may have lost it through bankruptcy or family misfortune.

Pope John Paul II describes how the celebration of the jubilee was a reminder that those who owned the land and its wealth "were really only stewards, ministers charged with working in the name of God . . . since it is God's will that created goods should serve everyone in a just way" (On the Coming of the Third Millennium, 13).

The biblical jubilee contains what we call today an "eco-justice" message, bringing together a call for social justice among all peoples and right relationship with the land and all creation.

Jesus in the Gospel of Luke describes his ministry in terms of jubilee (Luke 4:15-21). Jesus' proclamation of salvation and liberation is to overcome all alienation, reconciling "everything in heaven and on earth" (Colossians 1:18-20).

Part of human sin has been to see ourselves as separate from the rest of creation, seeing the natural world only as a source of profit and personal gain. To overcome this sin, we

need to affirm our place within the dynamic web of creation which supports and sustains all life.

We can learn much from the spiritual traditions of our aboriginal brothers and sisters which celebrate our kinship with the rest of creation and seek to strengthen the sacred circle of all creation.

## **Learning from Catholic Social Teaching**

Catholics see creation in a "sacramental" way. The abundance and beauty of God's creation reveals to us something of the generosity of the Creator. God is present and speaks in the dynamic life forces of our universe and planet as well as in our own lives. Respect for life needs to include all creation.

Catholic spirituality and sacramental practice are rooted in the belief that basic materials such as water, grain made into bread and grapes made into wine can communicate and convey God's saving action into our midst.

Ecological destruction and the loss of biodiversity obscure our ability to see and experience God and are an affront to the Creator. The fate of the natural world and human life are fully intertwined. Ecological destruction harms human life, and human social injustice inevitably has ecological consequences.

A continuing theme in Catholic social teaching has been the common good. This refers to the whole society being organized through its social, political and economic institutions so that all individuals, families and communities can thrive and seek their own good.

Today, clearly this traditional understanding of the common good needs to be expanded to include a healthy natural environment. Also, since our major ecological challenges, such as greenhouse warming and depletion of the ozone layer, are increasingly global in scope, we need to speak of a global common good going beyond all provincial and national boundaries.

In recent years, Pope John Paul II has spoken often of solidarity. In Canada and across the globe, all people are called to be in solidarity. An authentic understanding of development needs to include all, especially the poor and marginalized, and to address all the different dimensions of human flourishing over both the short and long term.

Our private property and accumulated wealth are not an absolute right because these carry a "social mortgage" at the service of the global common good.

A Christian ecological ethic also needs to include the principle of sufficiency. This principle cuts two ways. One is that everyone has the right to access the goods of creation to meet basic needs and to live a life of dignity.

Similarly, in a world of increasing population and widening inequality within nations and between nations that is already approaching real ecological limits, sufficiency means that those consuming a disproportionate share of the earth's natural resources, including energy resources, need to examine critically their lifestyles and levels of consumption. The traditional saying that the earth can provide for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed, is certainly relevant today.

The economy and the whole society need to become sustainable. As a society in Canada and globally, we need to live within our ecological means. Everything we do from the expansion of agribusiness to extensive logging, coal mining, and oil and gas exploration and production needs to pass the ethical test of sustainability.

Our Christian ethic needs to expand to include an intergenerational ethic where the needs of future generations are included in present-day decisions.

### **Urgent Need for Action: An Alberta Reflection**

This Christian environmental ethic poses a major challenge to us in Alberta. Alberta has been blessed with a superabundance of natural resources. Albertans have worked hard to exploit these resources, and a significant number of us have achieved a privileged lifestyle by Canadian and even more by global standards.

Over the years, Albertans have lived as if the abundant forests, minerals, oil, gas and coal deposits, fertile prairie topsoil and clean air and water extended without limit. The striking beauty of mountains, foothills, parkland and prairie landscapes have appeared as indestructible.

However, times have changed. Our stewardship of this abundance is now being questioned. Our economic model of maximizing profit in an increasingly global market is unsustainable.

The success of international responses of global ecological challenges will be linked to the decisions we make or fail to make in Alberta. The issue of global climate change being pushed by rising fossil fuel consumption and deforestation goes to the heart of Alberta's economic priorities.

The move to large-scale corporate agriculture in search of greater economic efficiencies runs the risk of destroying the agricultural foundations of fertile topsoil, clean air and water as well as the social ecology of vibrant rural human communities.

The rapid, widespread harvesting of the boreal forest is testing the limits of ecosystem integrity and risks the future of what should be a renewable resource for future generations.

Alberta's wealth has not been adequately shared within and beyond our provincial boundaries. This can be seen in the increased inequality and poverty in Alberta at a time

of multi-billion dollar budget surpluses. The situation of child poverty is especially significant.

## **Call to Conversion: A Time for Action**

As we look around us and read the "signs of the times," we face a challenging time of crisis and opportunity. This is a time to make important decisions. In religious terms, this time is a call to conversion.

We need to re-examine the ways we think and act, to affirm and support better what we are presently doing that is environmentally responsible and to critique and challenge what is irresponsible and unsustainable.

We invite everyone to become part of a wide ranging, action-oriented dialogue on how we can better care for creation:

As individuals and families:

- How can we become more responsible stewards in our lifestyle choices, energy consumption, garbage and recycling practices, and in our everyday decisions as consumers, workers, investors and citizens?

As parents and educators:

- How can we pass on to our youth a respect and appreciation for all God's creation as well as the confidence and hope that a more just and sustainable society is a historical possibility worth struggling to achieve?

As Church leaders and members:

- How is the call to biblical stewardship communicated in the preaching, sacramental celebration, educational programs and management decisions of our parishes and church organizations?

As business, labour, and community leaders:

- What is needed to make environmental responsibility a major priority, moving beyond unsustainable short term approaches to policies, institutions and economic initiatives that are sustainable and support the common good?

As elected government political leaders and public officials:

- How can respect for the integrity of creation become an integral part of all government decision-making so that present day budgetary surpluses are not the result of an increased environmental deficit being passed on to our children and grandchildren?

## **A New Beginning**

Scientists are telling us that in the face of rising global population and increased energy and natural resource consumption, we have a limited "window of opportunity" to change our environmentally destructive ways of relating to the earth. Failure to act in a timely and decisive manner will threaten the ability of the earth to nurture and sustain life as we know it.

This time of jubilee preparation is a call for "A New Beginning." The eco-justice message of the biblical jubilee is a challenge for us to embrace a right relationship with God, all human beings and all creation. This jubilee call is a call for us here and now to celebrate life, to care for creation.

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