

# Pastoral Letter on the Environment

My dear priests and people,

Some years ago a young woman named Sheila Harkin, who was blind from birth, received her sight through a new medical technique. After surgery, she looked out at the world for the first time. In an interview shortly afterwards she had this to say:

*I never thought the world was so beautiful. I often meet people and say, "Did you see the beautiful sunset last evening?" They say they never noticed. They take it for granted I suppose. But I just love the colours of the flowers, the trees, the grass. Everything is so different from what I had imagined it. I don't want to win the Lotto. I just want to see.*

## **The Beauty of the World**

Sheila Harkin was right on two counts. We live in a very beautiful world. We take God's gifts for granted. Perhaps, with the coming of spring we might slow down and take time to admire nature as it renews itself. "Lent" comes from the Anglo-Saxon word "lengten", meaning spring. The stretch in the days and the milder weather should entice us out of hibernation and into the countryside. Of course, Lent gives us an opportunity to be in step with nature as we renew our spiritual lives. The renewal of nature and the spiritual renewal can go hand-in-hand.

The people of Cashel and Emly are privileged to live in an area of great natural beauty. In my travels in the Diocese I am always struck by the scenery on every side. At the East Limerick side I visit Loch Gur and the Ballyhoura Hills. In the northwest there is Lough Derg, its waters lapping on to Ballina, with Tonntenna providing a panoramic view across the neighbouring counties. The Glen of Aherlow is one of the most beautiful inland views in Ireland. The Galteemore is its tallest admirer.

I pass by the green plains of Cashel watched over by St. Patrick's Rock. Further on is Holycross where the Suir is a perennial pilgrim. To the North, I can see the Devil's Bit from my window. Not far away are the Slieve Felim hills and westwards are the Clare Glens with its woodlands, river and waterfalls. I love to walk in Bishop's Wood and Kilcooley Abbey. The road between Drangan and Fethard has a marvellous view as far as Mount Leinster on a fine day. Strolling past the ruins of Athassel Abbey in the quiet of the evening I walk along the banks of the Suir. The mayfly is up and the fishermen are in their element. Later in the year, I will be driving through Dundrum when the leaves turn to gold and I will walk beyond Templetuohy to see



the heather in full bloom. In deference to my Limerick parishioners, I will not mention Slievenamon but I will confirm that; *"It's lovely round the hills of Killenaule"*. In fact, every parish of the forty-six in the Diocese has its own unique features. Without doubt, the Creator endowed our Diocese with more than its share of natural beauty.

### **Stewards of the Earth**

Every day we can identify with the Creator's sentiments. The Book of Genesis tells us that when God had completed his creation: *"God saw all he had made and indeed it was very good."* God appointed Adam and Eve to be the stewards of his creation. Man and woman were to care for the earth with wisdom and love. They were not the absolute owners; they were stewards to carry out the Creator's will. One wonders how the Creator would assess our overall performance as stewards. Would he mark us "very good" or "good", "poor" or "wretched"? I can quote two verdicts from contemporary human authorities.

The first comes from a participant at the Kyoto Conference on Climate Change in 1997:

*Nearly half of the earth's rain forests are gone... water tables are dropping rapidly... farmland, rivers and coastal waters are saturated with nitrates and phosphates...one in four of Europe's trees are dying due to acid rain...up to ten per cent of the earth's species of plants and animals have been made extinct. Fourteen of the world's seventeen major fishing grounds are either fished out or seriously depleted.*

Pope John Paul II pronounces the second verdict:

*Unfortunately, when we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. Man, especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitats, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into desert and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialisation, degrading the "flowerbed", Dante's image of the earth, which is our dwelling place<sup>1</sup>.*

### **A Threatening Ecological Catastrophe**

The Holy Father certainly did not mince his words. He has issued an even more urgent warning in the recent past. We are heading for an "ecological catastrophe" unless we call a halt at the *"edge of the abyss"*.

It is certain that the generations in the last century exceeded the terms of their contract. They tended to behave more like tyrants than stewards. In their greed to exploit God's gifts they showed a callous disregard for the balance and harmony which govern nature and a similar lack of concern for future generations. This attitude reminds one of the Irish MP, Sir Boyle Roche, whose remark in the House of Commons is now famous (or infamous): *"Why should we put ourselves out for posterity? What has posterity ever done for us?"*

Thankfully, the younger generation of today are far more sensitive to the delicate workings of nature. In their science and religion courses they learn to appreciate the ties which bind humans to the animals, plants and every created species. All are interconnected. The young people will readily relate, I know, to a modern theologian:

*The earth is the first sacrament of God's love for its inhabitants: it is the world that gives life and nurtures it, it is a partner in the journey of humanity toward the Kingdom. The earth can no longer be considered as an object to be controlled and dominated or as a means to be used or misused as one pleases. The earth is part of humanity and humans are part of the earth: they have a common destiny. To abuse the earth is to commit suicide, to misuse the earth is to threaten life; to respect the earth, to treasure it as one of God's greatest gifts, is to ensure life<sup>2</sup>*

### **Paying the Price**

Reckless exploitation in one area will have knock-on effects all across the board. For example, when the rain forests are cut down thousands of species of birds and insects are killed off. The tribes who have lived for thousands of years in this habitat are scattered. A culture, a way of life and flora and fauna are lost forever to the chainsaw.

By coincidence, [Trócaire's Lenten Campaign](#) this year draws our attention to indigenous people who have been dispossessed by greedy interlopers who destroy their environment and livelihood for short-term profit. The Mali people in Guatemala are one such dispossessed people. Trócaire is helping them to keep body and soul together.

Much of the destruction of non-renewable natural resources is done in the name of progress. But it will have long-term effects on our own and on future generations. The indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology, in industry and agriculture is producing very harmful effects. There is the depletion of the ozone layer and the related *"greenhouse effect"*. This is largely the result of the increase in the burning of fossil fuels associated with the growth in industry and transport. These damage health as well as bringing about climate change. The delicate balance

in nature will be overturned at our peril. Nature will rebel! Global warming is having, and will continue to have, serious consequences in the decades ahead. Are hurricanes and floods on the increase due to changes in climate, caused by our abuse of the environment?

### **A Call To Action**

The Second Vatican Council reminded people of goodwill the world over that *"God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of every individual and all people"*. We can see that this ideal is further from realisation than it was forty years ago when the Council was in session. Was it a coincidence that Dag Hammarskjöld, Secretary General of the U.N., spoke in the same vein and at the same time?:

*Christian spirituality is rooted in the incarnation and so considerations of social factors must come into it. A spirituality for us today will have something to say about the unjust distribution of wealth, about the destruction of the environment, about oppression and abuse in all its forms. And we cannot be spectators, but must have to realise that in our age the road to holiness passes through the road to action.*

Dag Hammarskjöld drew attention to the ecological problem while the Vatican Council did not refer to it specifically. However, concern for the environment is moving up the Church's agenda over the past decades. We are re-discovering our rich theology in this area and gaining new insights. The Church is like *"a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old"*. In 1979 Pope John Paul II named St. Francis of Assisi as the Patron Saint of Ecology. St. Francis is renowned for his love of God, his love of nature and his love of the poor.

The privileged few from the First World continue to accumulate excess goods, squander resources and the poor of the Third World, together with their environment and habitats, will be among the victims. But the effects of changes in climate and, indeed, of other forms of destruction of the environment are rarely confined to one country or one continent even. What happens at the North and South Poles will have consequences for the oceans up and down the world. The right to a safe environment is the right of every nation and of its citizens. From what I have been saying it would seem that Fluther Gould's verdict is still valid, at least where the environment is concerned: *"The whole world is in a state of chassis"*.

It is likely that some people will shrug their shoulders and say, *"What do you expect me to do about it? Surely, it is the business of the United Nations and the European Union or, at the very least, a matter for our own Government to deal with. With the best will in the world we could not make a difference even if we were willing to become involved. I was never much of an environmentalist"*, you say.

Now let us suppose for a moment that you got information that a landfill site or an incinerator was to be located in your area. Would not you and your neighbours spring into action? The placards would be out! Were communities ever so united as they were in North Tipperary, South Tipperary and East Limerick when landfill sites and incinerators were threatening to locate in their neighbourhoods? One would like to see such commendable interest extended to the wider issue of the care of the environment generally.

### **Right to Clean Drinking Water**

Since the subject is so vast I will confine myself from this point on to one particular issue. I will concentrate on water, with particular reference to Ireland and to our own Diocese. It so happens that the United Nations declared 2003 as the Year of Fresh Water. At first sight, it might seem that water is in such plentiful supply that we in Ireland have no need to be concerned. There is no shortage of rain, we have water on tap and it doesn't cost us a cent!

The question, however, is this. How clean is our drinking water? If it is up to standard all round how do you account for the fact that 110 million litres of bottled water were bought in this country last year? Even making allowances for fashion, how is it that one sees as many bottles of water as mobile phones in the hands of our young people up and down the country? Bottled water does not come cheap. We cannot be complacent then about our water supply nor can we assume that we will have a sufficient supply of clean water into the future.

Could I call in an expert verdict at this point on our stewardship of the most humble but precious of God's gifts? Fr Seán McDonagh became involved in environmental issues as a Columban missionary in the Philippines. The T'boli people among whom he worked, lived in the rain forest and saw their habitat being swept away by local and foreign timber companies. As a consequence, Fr. Seán was to become not only an expert but an active campaigner on environmental issues at home and abroad. Here is what he said recently about our stewardship:

*We are at an environmental cross-roads in Ireland. Forty per cent of the ground water of the country is contaminated with e-coli bacteria. Rivers and lakes like Lough Derg and Lough Rea on the Shannon are polluted with agricultural, human and industrial waste.*<sup>3</sup>

He also states:

*In Ireland we are blessed with a plentiful supply of rain. While the level of pollution in Ireland has not reached that of Eastern Europe there is no room for complacency.*<sup>4</sup>

He quotes an editorial from an Irish daily newspaper:

*Ireland's rivers have gone, in little more than a generation, from being almost pristine pure and clear to overblown imitations of open sewers and chemical drains.*

Fr. McDonagh recalls swimming with his companions in Lough Derg, in the 1950's/60's. Those were the days! The fishermen would boil the lake water and make tea with it. They would declare that you could get the taste of the salmon in the tea!

A three year study was concluded last year of the Liffey, the Boyne and the Suir waters - the "Three Rivers Project". It reported that great damage is being done to the rivers by phosphates from the land, urban sewage and septic tanks. The study concludes that while the quality of the water in the Liffey and the Boyne has improved slightly over the past few years, the Suir water has continued to deteriorate with up to fifty per cent slightly or moderately polluted. The Suir is to the Diocese of Cashel and Emly what the Jordan is to the Holy Land and Lough Derg is our Sea of Galilee!

The presence of e-coli bacteria in our ground water is a source of worry from a health point of view. Private Group Schemes have been contaminated or so it has been reported. Even holy wells have not escaped! One such well in a neighbouring county was found to be contaminated very recently. The right to clean drinking water is one of our basic human rights. Pope John Paul II placed it second only to food in his Peace Message for 2003. It came before housing, security, self-determination and independence.

It comes as no surprise that the Irish Government has been found to be in breach of the European Union Water Directive. Having heard the defence of our Government, the European Court of Justice handed down the following judgement in November 2002:

*The argument that Ireland had taken steps to improve the quality of its water intended for human consumption cannot be accepted.*

Our Government will, I trust, get its act together immediately in the interests of the health and safety of its citizens. The Government, however, cannot meet the EU demands without the active co-operation of all our communities and individuals.

### **Clean Water - An Increasingly Scarce Resource**

Water is fast becoming a scarce resource worldwide. The demand for it is doubling every twenty-one years. Increasing population and industrial and agricultural growth

are placing pressure on the supply of ground water. One third of the world's population experiences water scarcity at the moment and unless action is taken urgently, two thirds of its population will be facing severe scarcity in thirty years from now. A World Bank official has predicted that the wars of the twenty-first century will be about water rather than oil! Disputes about water are already arising in countries along the Nile and the unequal distribution of water is one of the many bones of contention between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

We need, therefore, to pay much greater attention to the management of water. We will have to stop polluting our rivers and lakes. The main sources of this, as I said, are fertilisers, which run off the land, industrial pollution and septic tanks from our houses. Farmers have guidelines from Teagasc and other relevant agencies to assist them in caring for our environment. I urge them to conscientiously follow these directives. In this regard, there needs to be discussion, understanding of the climatic and financial realities as well as some necessary flexibility in the formation and application of these guidelines. Industry must be got to take far greater care to avoid polluting our rivers, lakes and wells. More state-of-the art sewage treatment plants and more secure and serviced septic tanks need to be put in place both in densely populated areas and in single house developments.

The Government and the Local Authorities will have to help to pay for these essential measures. We cannot, for example, put extra costs on our farmers who are already experiencing a fall in their incomes in recent years. Protection of the environment is a community as well as an individual responsibility.

### **Environmental Maintenance**

It might be possible to initiate a competition for environmental maintenance similar to the Tidy Towns competition. Parish rivalry might act as a spur. When Fr. Thomas Fennelly, later Archbishop, was parish priest of Moycarkey in the 1890's he preached about good farming practice, in season and out of season. It was generally acknowledged that Moycarkey had the best-maintained homesteads and the most up-to-date farming methods of the time. It was regarded as a model for other farming communities. Perhaps some of the farming organisations might consider this idea. I am ready to lend a hand. Already, the REPS scheme is an earnest of an increasing role for farmers as custodians of the environment.

I think all of us who are householders will admit that we waste a great amount of water every day. The statistics show that Americans use two million litres of water per person each year. The figure is one million for Australians and six hundred thousand litres per person for Europeans. So, while we waste quality water with flushed toilets, leaking pipes and leaking taps, poor women in parts of Africa and

other Third World countries are still walking miles to bring home a bucket of water. I can assure you that such people use it sparingly.

Indeed, it is not that long ago since our mothers and we, their children, went to the well with sweet gallons and a white enamel bucket. Let us ask ourselves this question: if tomorrow morning our homes were all fitted out with water meters and we were obliged to pay by the litre - as is the case in every other EU country - would we use as much water as we do today?

### **Call For An "Ecological Conversion"**

Pope John Paul II has called for an "ecological conversion". This means a radical reassessment of our way of life. We now belong to the better off nations of the world. The Holy Father challenges us:

*Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its lifestyle. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage these cause...Simplicity, moderation and discipline as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become part of everyday life, lest we all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few<sup>5</sup>.*

This "ecological conversion" described by the Pope fits in very readily with the spirit of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we are admonished: *"Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return"*. On Ash Wednesday we publicly display the badge of our humble origin - *"humus"* is the Latin for earth or soil. We acknowledge our common roots with the totality of created things. We are also reminded of our return to the earth as a temporary resting place where we will await the resurrection of the body. This Lent we might do an examination of conscience on our use or misuse of God's gifts of creation which we have been given. Are we good stewards or have we been careless and wasteful?

### **Religious Symbolism of Water**

The Church uses water regularly in its liturgy. It is a symbol of the cleansing, healing and liberating power of God's grace. Recall Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman who came with her bucket at midday to Jacob's well. Jesus used the water in the well as a metaphor for the life of grace, which he was about to give her: *"The water I shall give will turn into a spring inside welling up to eternal life"* ([John 4:14](#))

Water is, of course, a central element in the celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism. When we come to celebrate the Easter Vigil at the end of Lent, we may take part in the Baptism of babies with the newly blessed Easter water. Psalm 103 is

sung after the first reading which is the Creation account from Genesis. Here are two verses:

You founded the earth on its base  
to stand from age to age.  
You wrapped it with the ocean like a cloak  
the waters stood higher than the mountains.  
You made springs gush forth in the valleys  
they flow between the hills.  
On their banks dwell the birds of heaven  
from the branches they sing their song.

(Psalm 103)

The blessing of the Easter water reminds us of the natural benefits of water, *"it makes the seeds to grow, it refreshes us and makes us clean"*. It continues: *"Let this water remind us of our Baptism, let us share the joys of our brothers and sisters who are baptised this Easter"*.

The joy of Christ's Resurrection is expressed in the Easter *Alleluia*. Humanity will share in Christ's victory over sin and death. But will the earth not also share in this victory? Since the earth took part in the sin of humanity, it will share in God's final act of Redemption. There is the essential unity of human beings and nature which we are beginning to understand better. A New Heaven and a New Earth are promised. The earth, as we know it, will be transformed. Animals, plants and even inorganic matter are destined to be transformed in this New Heaven and New Earth. This is what St. Paul referred to when he wrote, 'The whole of creation groans with pain and awaits its transformation.' ([Romans 8:19](#))

Isaiah announced this transformation. *"Behold I create a New Heaven and a New Earth."* ([Isaiah 65:17](#)). While we may take God's creation for granted, respect it as I have urged you, or misuse it, keep in mind that the Creator has further plans for it!

Yours sincerely in Christ,  
Dermot Clifford  
Archbishop of Cashel and Emly.

<sup>1</sup> Pope John Paul II, *"God made Man the Steward of Creation"*. L'Osservatore Romano, 24 January 2001. p.11.

<sup>2</sup> Fr. John Fuellenback, *Church: Community for the Kingdom*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York. 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Fr. Seán McDonagh, *Greening of the Christian Millennium*. Dominican Publications. Dublin. 1999. p.10

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Seán McDonagh, *The Water of Life* (to be published).

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*. World Day of Peace. 1990.

Copied from <http://www.cashel-emly.ie/pastoral/documents/lent2003.html>, 3 May 2004