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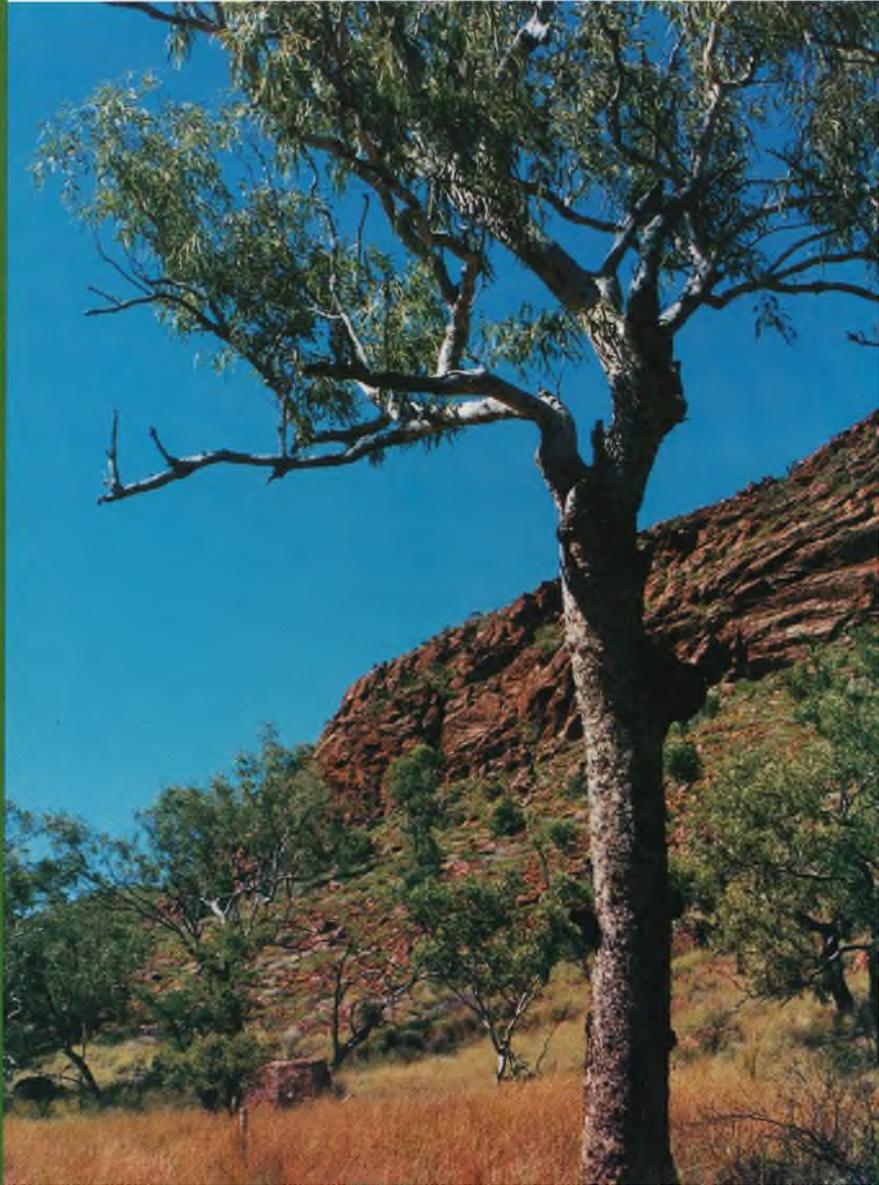
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OUR QUEST FOR ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY

by Michael Gormly ssc



CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE SERIES
No. 37

**OUR QUEST FOR
ECOLOGICAL
INTEGRITY:
What is the Catholic role in the
Environment?**

By
MICHAEL GORMLY SSC

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FOREWORD

There is no human activity that does not have a moral dimension and this is as true of how we deal with our environment as it is of how we treat each other.

This paper by Fr Michael Gormly summarises important teachings from Pope John Paul II, Catholic Bishops of Asia, the World Council of Churches, the US Catholic Bishops, the Bishops of the Philippines, and the Bishops of Aotearoa New Zealand as well as studies by Australian individuals and church groups on the theological dimensions of the ecological question.

To these are added important contributions from theologians, teachers, popular writers and activists.

On the back of all these sources Fr Gormly confronts us with some very basic questions which need to be addressed if we are to take our concerns for the earth as seriously as the current environmental situation warrants.

He writes that “Our quest for ecological integrity is more than just an accommodation between the churches and the green movement”. Rather it is a spiritual awakening that requires a conversion.

A study of this paper will be a good start to the process for some and a stimulus to renewal for others.

Bishop William Brennan
Chairman, ACSJC
Bishop of Wagga Wagga

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this occasional paper is to affirm a religious and missionary dimension within the environmental debate. In reading the signs of the times for the new millennium, creation and the natural universe must be treated with the utmost seriousness. The Year of Jubilee, 2000, is a fresh opportunity within our Church communities to begin a sustained commitment to the environment and the integrity of creation.

These pages draw together many questions and responses on local and global issues, and present topics related to the environment, ecology and creation. It is by no means the last word, but helps to meet the basic question: What has the Catholic Church to say on the environment? The object is to bring together current ideas and insights, and to identify leading voices and resources available. The hope is to provide information and stimulate discussion.

The quest for ecological integrity now proceeds in alliance with all our efforts for justice and peace. However, it is not an optional extra. Here we delve into the profound interconnectedness between God, our world, ecology and ourselves. We clarify a unique and spiritual perspective, and declare that religious faith makes a difference. Ecological timidity is no excuse. The danger of serious damage to the environment demands a deliberate rethink about life on our planet, God's earth.

Our engagement is sustained on various levels. Ecological challenges are local and global, multi-dimensional yet somehow inter-related. The sources of hope and direction are also diverse. The prophets are as likely to be on the periphery of the Church as at the centre. Environmental problems encompass the realms of science and technology, industry and politics, law and economics. We find they relate also to our culture, religion and spirituality. In the quest to respect creation and to establish a better future, we must work together. Positive recognition must go out to committed environmentalists, farmers, politicians, scientists, teachers, lobbyists and activists. In this dialogue there is a place for all believers.

The start of the new millennium is a fine time to invite the Catholic community to explore the links between creation and faith, our planet and faith, our environment and faith. This relates to the Jubilee challenge to renew the face of the earth, drawing on scripture, tradition and current Catholic Social Teaching. Environmental awareness might not be deeply embedded in the consciousness of Catholics, but rich spiritual

and prophetic responses can be identified. Pope John Paul II emphasises that a just, peaceful and integrated planet is not just a slogan or an optional ideal, but a moral and practical necessity.

For church leaders, the Jubilee is an opportunity to re-emphasise the spiritual, religious and ethical perspectives of ecology and integrity of creation. For pastoral and liturgical leaders, it is a moment to bring fresh appreciation for God's creation into their preaching and celebration. Teachers and educators can bring awareness, insight and new attitudes to their classrooms and presentations. Parents can encourage children to love, respect and delight in creation, nature and an earth that nurtures us. Primary producers and business people can make protection of the environment a central concern, collaborating for the common good. Scientists, economists and other specialists can bring a faith perspective to the challenges and the crises they face. All citizens can share the debate with the policy makers, resisting short-term, self-serving responses, developing socially just and environmentally sustainable decisions.

1. HOW GREEN IS OUR CHURCH?

Recent Church teaching

Over the past decade, Church leadership has given more and more recognition to environmental questions, naming ecology as a most urgent issue. The churches too often in the past came across as marginal and moralistic, as they did little more than clarify doctrinal positions. The adequacy of such theology was not faced. Absence from deep engagement in environmental matters often resulted in confusion. However, as the 1990s progressed, Christian churches appeared to get their ecological act together. They have placed great emphasis on Creation. The next two chapters focus on the formal or official teaching.

Responsibility for the environment is increasingly evident in statements from official sources, along with imaginative theological reflection and robust engagement with the concrete situations. First consideration goes to statements from Pope John Paul II and the recent regional synods of Asia and Oceania, plus a review of World Council of Churches responses. Authoritative statements indicate where ecology is finding a place on the agenda of the Christian churches.

POPE JOHN PAUL II

Pope John Paul II's major statement on ecological ethics came in January 1990. He linked the issue of respect for nature with the pursuit of global peace in his World Day of Peace message, entitled: *Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation!* The worldwide ecological crisis was declared a moral issue. The moral and the religious aspects of the ecological question demanded a new global solidarity. Nature cannot be deciphered outside relationships with God, the Creator, and humankind. Exploitation is a moral wrong. Everyone has a responsibility to the common good.

The document highlights four of the principal moral issues of our time:

- * The indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology which bring negative effects on both the eco-system and the well-being of future generations.
- * The lack of respect for life, evident when the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, of animal and plant life.
- * The possibility of biological disturbance resulting from indiscriminate genetic manipulation in violation of ethical norms.
- * The integrity of creation means that greed and selfishness are contrary to the dynamic order held in delicate balance in the created universe.

The message called for adequate moral responses based on recognised Catholic social teaching:

- * Solidarity between the developing and highly industrialised nations needs to be established.
- * Structural forms of poverty must be addressed—land, debt, dependency.
- * Avoidance of all forms of war—bacteriological, biological, chemical, nuclear weapons.
- * The modern consumer lifestyle is in question—consumerism, gratification.
- * A genuine conversion is need to educate people in ecological responsibility.
- * A focus is placed on the aesthetic value of creation—contemplating the beauty of creation.

A hierarchy of issues come into play: linkages between justice, peace and ecology; economic structures and uses of resources; ecological crises and disasters; conflict and war; market economics; human psychology; power and progress; scarcity and poverty; collective and structural change; simplicity, moderation and discipline.

What can be said when considering the natural universe as creation from a faith perspective?

- * A relationship exists with a transcendent reality; a larger universe story.
- * An inter-dependence, relatedness, connectedness exists among creatures.
- * An integrated and ethical perspective brings all creation into relatedness.
- * A mediating role is needed between scientific approaches and the spiritual.

“Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone ... its various aspects demonstrate the need for concerted efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, states and the international community. This not only goes hand-in-hand with efforts to build true peace, but also confirms and reinforces those efforts in a concrete way.

“When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely, that there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations. I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral crisis.”²

In 1991, Pope John Paul II issued a social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, to mark the centenary of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*.³ He examined the issues influencing today’s social order; the strengths and weaknesses of capitalism and the free market; and took up such themes as work, unions, wages, unemployment, profit, atheism, class struggle, freedom and private property. The ecological question did not escape his consideration.

In his 1998 encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, the Pope made significant refer-

ences to the environment.⁴ In singling out the most pressing issues facing humanity today, the first to be mentioned was that of ecology. Along with other such urgent questions as peace and the co-existence of different races and cultures, the ecology crisis may possibly find a solution if there is clear and honest collaboration among Christians, the followers of other religions, and all those who have at heart the renewal of humanity. Such collaboration would provide a potent underpinning for the true and planetary ethics needed across the world.

At the end of the decade, in his January 1999 World Day of Peace message, the Pope focused on rights and responsibilities, especially related to the dignity of the human person.⁵ However, responsibility for the environment was not overlooked:

“The promotion of human dignity is linked to the right to a healthy environment, since this right highlights the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and society. A body of international, regional and national norms on the environment is gradually giving juridic form to this right. But juridic measures by themselves are not sufficient.

“The danger of serious damage to land and seas, and to the climate, flora and fauna calls for profound change in modern civilisation’s typical consumer lifestyle, particularly in the richer countries. Nor can we underestimate another risk, even if it is a less drastic one: people who live in poverty in rural areas can be driven by necessity to exploit beyond sustainable limits the little land which they have at their disposal ...

“The world’s present and future depend on the safeguarding of creation because of the endless interdependence between human beings and their environment. Placing human well-being at the centre of concern for the environment is actually the surest way of safeguarding creation; this in fact stimulates the responsibility of the individual with regard to natural resources and their judicious use.”⁶

THE 1998 SYNODS FOR ASIA AND OCEANIA

Ecology and the integrity of creation was not to the fore in either the preparatory documentation or the presentations at the 1998 Synod for this region of the world – Oceania. However, it did not entirely escape mention in the summary statement of the bishops at the conclusion of the Synod in December 1998. The formal post-Synod statement comes from Rome.⁷

Care and protection of the world created by God was well on the agenda of the Synod for Asia.⁸ The churches in Asia declared a need to remain aware of the ecological problems facing humanity and to bring pressing issues to the attention of policy makers. By means of guidance and prophetic declarations, churches can give service to decision makers in politics, industry, economics, trade and other areas.

The pre-Synod papers noted that people today have the responsibility to pass to future generations the resources of the earth, sky and sea, since they form one support system for life given by the Creator and sustaining God. Consumerism and greed are striking at the root of the sources of life: the seas, rivers, forests, plant and animal life. Unabated technological research and experiments can unsettle ecosystems and balances, and endanger future generations and their life on earth.

The final statement from the Synod for Asia spoke of the Church engaged in a triple dialogue: a dialogue with the cultures of Asia; a dialogue with the religions of Asia; and a dialogue with the peoples of Asia. The section on ecology was brief but concrete:

“Entrusted by God the Creator to be stewards of his creation, we must have a respect for Mother Earth and the life systems that nourish us. We should do all in our power to prevent the degradation of the environment, which is the consequence of unbridled greed, among other causes. If not, the result will be the pollution of land, rivers and air, and the cutting down of forests. We must work for ecologically sustainable development, particularly in the agricultural sector.”

RESTORING A SENSE OF REVERENCE FOR GOD’S CREATION

In November 1999 Pope John Paul II issued the summary document from the Synod for Asia: *Ecclesia in Asia*. The following paragraphs relate to the environment:

“When concern for economic and technological progress is not accompanied by concern for the balance of the ecosystem, our earth is inevitably exposed to serious environmental damage, with consequent harm to human beings. Blatant disrespect for the environment will continue as long as the earth and its potential are seen merely as objects of immediate use and consumption, to be manipulated by an unbridled desire for

profit. It is the duty of Christians and of all who look to God as the Creator to protect the environment by restoring a sense of reverence for the whole of God's creation. It is the Creator's will that man should treat nature not as a ruthless exploiter but as an intelligent and responsible administrator.

"The Synod Fathers pleaded in a special way for greater responsibility on the part of the leaders of nations, legislators, business people and all who are directly involved in the management of the earth's resources. They underlined the need to educate people, especially the young, in environmental responsibility, training them in the stewardship over creation which God has entrusted to humanity. The protection of the environment is not only a technical question; it is also and above all an ethical issue. All have a moral duty to care for the environment, not only for their own good but also for the good of future generations.

"In conclusion, it is worth remembering that in calling on Christians to work and sacrifice themselves in the service of human development, the Synod Fathers were drawing upon some of the core insights of biblical and ecclesial tradition ... In the Synod's appeal for human development and for justice in human affairs, we hear a voice that is both old and new. It is old because it rises from the depths of our Christian tradition, which looks to that profound harmony which the Creator intends; it is new because it speaks to the immediate situation of countless people in Asia today."¹⁰

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF LIFE

The World Council of Churches

Many voices within the World Council of Churches – lay people, scientists, economists, indigenous people, youth, clergy and theologians – are seeking to redefine the relationship between humanity and the whole of God's creation. Central to their concern for the environment has been a need to re-articulate a theology of creation that adequately responds to the ecological crises of our time: global climate change; the impact of international debt; proliferation of nuclear capabilities and biotechnology. There is a quest for a coherent theology, a critical hermeneutic and an ethic that can gather voices within a common framework for action.

The WCC from the mid-1980s pursued a process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Threats to justice, peace and creation are inter-related, so responding is a matter of urgency, and responses must take concrete forms and express solidarity. The final document from the 1988 World Convocation in Seoul affirmed that God, the Giver of Life, will not abandon the creation and that God's covenant is God's irrevocable "yes" to creation, which calls us to acknowledge our role as God's partners. One of the ten affirmations speaks of Creation as Beloved by God. Another, The Earth is the Lord's. The participants committed themselves to building a culture that can live in harmony with creation's integrity.¹¹

The WCC Assembly held in Canberra in 1991 made conversion to economic and ecological sustainability a central concern for creation. The challenge was to re-read the Bible from the perspective of the birds, water, air, trees and mountains, as well as from the perspective of the poor, the oppressed and the violated in our age. Six strategies emerged for realising the biblical vision for the fulfilment of creation:

- * To monitor and support local self-empowerment.
- * To seek just patterns of trade, share resources, overcome the international debt crisis and reverse militarisation.
- * To rethink the economics of development.
- * To cooperate with people of other faiths.
- * To support democracy and participation.
- * To encourage awareness-building, education and spirituality

A program named *A Theology of Life* was later developed to integrate these concerns. This concentrated on matters of social ethics and moral responsibility – finding a compelling ethic for Christian people.¹²

2. CARE FOR GOD'S CREATION

Local churches respond

Church conferences around the world are placing Care for God's Creation firmly within the social doctrine promoted in communities, parishes, schools, seminaries, and education programs. This summary of challenges and directions comes from the United States Catholic leadership conference:

“On a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that we show respect for the creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan; it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.

“This teaching is a complex and nuanced tradition with many other important elements. Principles like subsidiarity and the common good outline the advantage and limitations of markets, the responsibilities and limits of government, and the essential roles of voluntary associations ...

“There will be legitimate differences and debate over how these challenging moral principles are applied in concrete situations. Differing prudential judgements on specifics cannot be allowed, however, to obscure the need for every Catholic to know and apply these principles.”¹³

AUSTRALIA: WORKING TOWARDS A PLAN OF ACTION

Ecology and the integrity of creation emerged on the social justice agenda in Catholic Australia during the 1980s. One of the early occasional papers by Eugene Stockton reflected on the context of land: *This Land Our Mother*.¹⁴ The teaching and writings of the Irish missionary, Sean McDonagh, influenced and encouraged many.¹⁵ In 1988, in recognition of 200 years of European settlement in Australia, the Catholic and Uniting Church social justice councils, along with the Australian Council of Churches, issued *A Just and Proper Settlement*, reflecting on the land as gift and responsibility.¹⁶ The document faced the quest for justice in the light of past injustices to the Aboriginal peoples in loss of their lands, plus the need for ongoing care and responsibility for the earth and nature. In 1991 the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council issued *Christians and Their Duty Towards Nature*.¹⁷

Eco-justice was given an impetus at the 1996 national social justice consultation: *People First!*, sponsored by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference. The environment was the eleventh of twelve issues placed on the poverty action agenda.¹⁸

“Poverty is more than a lack of material goods. The natural environment and its resources are a divine gift. We are called to treat them responsibly and manage them wisely in the interests of future generations. When

present generations leave to their children a world of diminished capacity in the air we breathe or the soil we till, we are bequeathing a debt that can never be paid.

“Our materialistic desire to consume must be tempered by a spiritual need to recognise our dependence on nature for our very survival. Economic growth may enhance our material standard of living, but the benefits of growth must be shared among all and the quality of human life is dependent on living in harmony with our total environment.

“In some cases this may require the conservation and protection of parts of our environment from any form of economic exploitation. Decisions on such matters must take into account the common good of the whole community.”¹⁹

In the published Plan of Action, three recommendations were recorded under the summary title: Promoting Ecologically Sustainable Development.²⁰ The first called on the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC) to engage the issue of ecology and the integrity of creation. The second recommended that a national association be established to promote reflection and activity around the topic. The third encouraged agencies to lobby around two specific issues: climate change and resource development. To this extent ecology and creation have made the agenda of the peak social action bodies within the Catholic Church in Australia.

THE PHILIPPINES: WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR BEAUTIFUL LAND?

The Catholic Bishops of the Philippines observed in 1988 that the nation was at a critical point in its history in their statement: *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* The people had experienced political instability, economic decline and growth in armed conflict. Yet there was an overlooked, deep-seated problem lying at the root. All the living systems on land and in the sea were being ruthlessly exploited.

“One does not need to be an expert to see what is happening and to be profoundly troubled by it ... brown eroded hills ... dried up river beds ... erosion ... chemical poisoning ... shrinking fish catches ... destruction of coral reefs. The picture is clear and bleak. The attack on the natural world is whittling away the very base of our living world and endanger-

ing its fruitfulness for future generations.”

The letter is a call to respect and defend life; a statement to reflect the cry of the people and the land. It challenged the exploitative mentality, at variance with the Gospel of Jesus. The appeal was made to individuals, to the churches, to the government and to non-governmental organisations.²¹

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND: A CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

In 1997 the New Zealand bishops issued a statement centred on *A Consistent Ethic of Life: Te Kahu-O-Te-Ora*.²² A consistent ethic of life places the sacredness of creation and the need to protect and enhance all human life, and the life of the planet on which we depend, as a basic and central moral point of reference. It draws on the traditional principles taught by the Church, bringing them together in a modern framework.

These principles are essential components of the common good, related to one another, but constitutive elements in an overall pro-life morality. They form a seamless garment of ethics which if put into practice would ensure the safety and continued development of humanity and its environment. Eight inter-related components are named: Integrity of Creation; Abortion; Euthanasia; Death Penalty; Peace; Discrimination; Poverty; and the Arms Race.

Here the Church calls on all people of good will to make moral choices to reject the climate of profound and growing disrespect for human life. The choice to protect the environment, to eliminate discrimination and poverty, and to oppose war, abortion, euthanasia, the arms race and the death penalty, will be a choice to follow the biblical injunction to choose life, not death.

“We live in a world of extraordinary beauty, blessed with wonderful gifts by our Creator, and containing life, love and diversity in abundance. We acknowledge that in every culture and community wonderfully mature and committed people serve the needs of their neighbour with selflessness and generosity. All these we celebrate for the great hope they offer ...

“The future of humanity itself has become dependent on the wise

choices made by the human family to ensure the flourishing in abundance of life, love and diversity. There must be continuing reflection on the value of life so that wise choices can be made.”

The purpose in presenting a Consistent Ethic of Life is based on the belief that concern for any of these matters threatening life requires a concern for the broader issues in society with respect for all forms of life. One aspect of life affects another. All are important. Together they make a whole. The sacred cloak of integrity, of wholeness, embraces them all. Consider integrity of creation:

“Respect for the integrity of creation is a central component of Church teaching. The integrity of the ecosystem within which human life exists is vital to our very survival, the well-being of future generations, and respect for the work of God.

“Creation itself provides the primary source from which all life flows. Within creation all life forms are interconnected. Our actions, the things we use, the ways we use them, and the wastes we produce need to respect the integrity of this creation. The Bible tells us in its account of the creation of the world that, ‘God saw that it was good.’ (Genesis 1:31)

“It is also in keeping with the traditions of the Maori of Aotearoa that we need to respect the sacredness of creation, partners in life with the earth, the oceans, the lakes, the animal world, the mountains, the fish of the sea and the birds in our forests and gardens. From such sources, balanced by the infinite hand of God, we draw all life and nourishment. Without them we face death.”

UNITED STATES: RENEWING THE EARTH

The United States Bishops’ Conference issued an invitation to reflection and action on the environment in the 1991 document, *Renewing the Earth*.²³ Humanity is said to be facing problems in five inter-related fields: Environment; Energy; Economics; Equity; and Ethics. To ensure the survival of a healthy planet, we must not only establish a sustainable economy, but must also labour for justice within and among nations. We must seek a society where economic life and environmental commitment work together to protect and enhance life on this planet.

The aim of the document is to stimulate dialogue by highlighting the

ethical dimensions of the environmental crisis; linking questions of ecology, poverty and development; standing with people impacted by ecological abuse and tradeoffs; promoting a vision of a just and sustainable world community; inviting the Catholic community to reflect more deeply on the religious dimensions of the topic; and broadening the conversation on the potential contribution of the churches.

Along with a re-emphasis on basic social justice concepts, *Renewing the Earth* suggests certain themes and perspectives for religious teaching and moral debate:

- * Christians bring a God-centred and sacramental view of the universe, grounding accountability.
- * They bring a consistent respect for human life, extending to respect for all creation.
- * Their ethic of solidarity promotes cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world.
- * They profess an understanding of the purpose of creation, requiring an equitable use of resources.
- * They bring a passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world.
- * Their concept of authentic development offers a balanced direction for progress.

3. RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Local insight and comment

Aside from the authoritative statements from those with leadership responsibilities, it is important to identify people in the local churches who bring the dialogue alive with insight, comment and involvement. The following list is limited, but indicates that the quest for ecological integrity is diverse and energetic.

AN AUSTRALIAN ECOLOGICAL THEOLOGIAN

Denis Edwards

Over the past decade, Australian priest and theologian, Denis Edwards, has centred much of his study and writing on cosmology and ecology.

He has pursued a series of ecological and scientific themes, and related them to the central doctrines of Christianity. Each of his four recent books expands our understanding of the vital connections between God, creation, the universe, humanity, incarnation, salvation and kingdom.²⁴

In *Jesus and the Cosmos* (1991) he first tells his story of the cosmos, drawing on the insights of 20th century science. He relates the place of human beings, and the action of God, to the scientific creation story. He proceeds to the story of Jesus, named as a preacher of the reign of God. Death and resurrection are central to the story of the relationship between Jesus and the evolving cosmos. Here a secular universe and a spiritual creation blend. Ultimately, the risen Christ is the dynamic power in the heart of the cosmic processes.

In *Made from Stardust* (1992) Edwards explores the place of human beings within creation. How do we understand ourselves as part of the expanding cosmos and the evolutionary history of life on earth? A new time, he contends, calls for a fresh theological approach. After sharing insights from scripture, he outlines a theological view of human beings in inter-relationship with other creatures.

Jesus the Wisdom of God (1995) has the subtitle: *An Ecological Theology*. Here he proposes his ecological theology based on wisdom and Christology. The Wisdom of God in biblical tradition flows to Jesus, who preaches and practises radical compassion. Jesus embodies a love that moves the stars. All things are transformed in Christ. At the centre of this ecological theology is the Trinitarian God of love and ecstatic fecundity. The universe is the self-expression of God.

All creatures have value in themselves because of their relationship to God. Human beings are not dominant, but companions to other creatures in an earth community. They are called to live in mutual relationship, in a community of creatures. This companionship with all earth creatures gives meaning to the intrinsic value of creatures, to human dignity, to reverence for life, to ethical discernment, and to ecological sustainability.

Christian ecological praxis has a foundation in the conviction that God is to be understood in dynamic Trinitarian terms. God is radically relational. This suggests an approach to all of reality as relational. To-be is to-be-in-relationship. God communicates God-self in creating. This leads to the insight that each creature is to be seen as God's self-

expression. Other principles follow: the intrinsic value of all creatures; the unique value of human beings; the priority for the poor and weak; reverence for life; the biotic community; the criterion of consciousness; ecological sustainability; and kinship with all God's creatures.

In *The God of Evolution* (1999), Edwards continues to make connections between scientific insights into the mysteries of the universe and a Trinitarian theology of the mystery of God. He engages the evolutionary worldview and the biblical stories of origin. The God of evolution emerges as a God of mutual friendship. Creation unfolds within God as relational. God creates with a certain divine self-limitation, and the human comes to grip with freedom and grace.

ONE WHO CHALLENGES THE CHURCHES

Paul Collins, MSC

Paul Collins, a vigorous commentator on the Australian religious and social scene, has constantly challenged the Catholic community to a responsible awareness of God's earth. In 1991 he published *No Set Agenda*, addressing the question: What will be the major issues facing Australian Catholicism as we proceed to a new millennium? He was unequivocal in highlighting the challenge presented by the environmental crisis.²⁵

"The key problem facing the Australian Church in this decade and in the first part of the coming millennium is the ecological crisis. All other theological, moral and pastoral issues fade into insignificance besides this. For the Catholic Church to stand idly by while Australia is environmentally ravaged would be a denial of its deepest responsibilities ...

"Unless the Church faces up to the environmental issue, it will have little to say to contemporary culture. In a way, it is really only the religious and spiritual traditions that can provide the philosophical and theological foundation that contemporary environmentalism requires. That is why I see it as the most serious issue we face within the Australian Catholic Church today."

Moving beyond the rhetoric of crisis, Collins sought a fresh and emerging worldview, a new cosmology. In 1995 he published *God's Earth – Religion* as if matter really mattered. He set about providing a context

within which we can begin to look at environmental and religious questions more creatively. He focused on the world, God, ecology and us, and the profound interconnections among all four. He faced the questions: Are we the centre of everything? Does matter count in religion? What are the forces shaping our age? Why the destructive tendency?

“Our religious traditions have been at the very best less than half-hearted in their response to the contemporary ecological and cultural crisis. There has been some window-dressing in the Christian communities, but the bottom line for all of them is the absolute priority of the human. Everything else in the world plays a secondary role to humankind and its needs. No matter what their rhetoric about ecology, the mainstream Christian churches are infected with anthropomorphism.”

Collins advocates a turning back to the natural world from which we originally sprang, and a reinterpretation of our cultural and religious experience in the light of our interaction with that natural world. So the heart of his writing is about the deep theological, human and cultural shift that contemporary ecology inevitably implies. In the quest for ethical foundations, for a worthy theology and spirituality, many sources of insight and wisdom are identified.

A VOICE FOR CREATION SPIRITUALITY

Veronica Green, RSM

Mercy Sister Veronica Green was dedicated to articulating a fresh Christian attitude to the environment and re-telling stories of creation. In her research, lectures and ministry she called the Catholic community to a shift in thinking in the ways we perceive the whole of creation.²⁶

She was greatly influenced by the cultural-historian, priest-theologian, Thomas Berry. Her teaching spoke of the universe as a developing reality; planet earth subject to ongoing evolution; seeking ways to re-inhabit the earth in a truly human manner, re-establishing an earth community, and promoting the growth of cosmic-earth-human values. Her challenge was towards awareness of the universe story, to reshape perceptions of the universe, and to allow a new, transforming story to be told.

City dwellers, she noted, have difficulty in experiencing planet earth as

the primary mode of the divine. How will they come to know the earth as educator, lawgiver, and the source of poetry, music, mysticism and dance? Perhaps they may regain their capacity to interact creatively with the environment by learning from those in intimate relationship with the land, rocks, trees, winds, sky, water. Western Christians have an urgent need to learn, re-learn and develop the resources which will enable them to interact creatively with the environment.

“At this crucial time of changing paradigms there is an urgency for the voice of the official Church to be heard, especially by first world Christians, giving guidance on an attitude to the environment ... How do the masses of Christians, including, and perhaps especially the youth, ever come to equate their religion with what is relevant and of immediate concern in their lives? If the Christian approach to the environment is closely linked with a variety of social justice issues, then one of the injustices to be addressed must surely be that of neglecting to acquaint all concerned with the Church’s thinking on what is the most momentous happening of the century? And, if the ministers, priests, theologians are unable to articulate the full story, then the vocation of the Christian scientists, ecologists, farmers, poets, writers, etc could be utilised, while at the same time tentatively closing the gap between what has been regarded as the sacred and the secular, creating a more integrated concept of Church.”

LAND, CULTURE AND HERITAGE

Maisie Cavanagh

The distinctive spiritual relationship of the Aboriginal people with their land is an inspiration for Christians who struggle to appreciate that land is not just an economic resource.²⁷

“My Mother’s land can be dry and harsh. Yet every tree, every cluster of rocks, mountain, water hole, river, cave is sacred – every feature. The billabongs and the places where the spirits live are all landscapes of the soul. For we as people see these mountains, rivers, trees, animals, wind, as brothers and sisters, and we are part of the one thing.

“Thinking in these terms pitches you into a different psychology. So we take notice of the call of the black crow, or the laugh of the kookaburra,

or the change in the wind. We pay attention to the willy-wagtail when he comes to visit, or the magpie who sits on the clothes line even here in the hustle and bustle of city life.

“Our mythology plays a major part in our lives and the lives of our children. It’s what gives meaning and value to our lives. It’s mysterious, exciting and nourishing. And it helps us as Aboriginal people to know our place as we move on in life.

“That is why we enjoy our Aboriginal liturgy in the bush, where we can have a fire, walk through the smoke, sit in a circle and have the earth beneath our feet, and feel the sun and the breeze, and see the clouds in the sky as we celebrate our smoking ceremonial liturgies.

“My spirituality? It is the fire that burns within me. It enables me to reach into the very depths of who I am. It is what nourishes me. It is what keeps me alive. I know now it is what kept my parents alive also.”

AN EARTHMINDED SPIRITUALITY

Eugene Stockton

In his study and writings, Parramatta priest and archaeologist Eugene Stockton makes a strong appeal for appreciating the distinctively Aboriginal way of relating to the land and viewing the world. In 1995 he published *The Aboriginal Gift – Spirituality for a Nation*.²⁸

“What Aboriginal spirituality has to offer, not only to Australians, but I believe to the world at large, is a spirituality that is alert to the environment, both in society and in nature. Just as Aboriginal Australians are part of, and in tune with their environment, reading from the landscape a law of harmony among themselves and with nature, so they can teach us in turn to read from the environment the way to live in tune with it and ourselves, as we go to God through our land.

“The land is a sacred place, the locus of creative acts of the Dreaming, which persists into the present ... with varying degrees of sacredness throughout. Those who know can perceive spiritual contours (like our weather maps) superimposed on the physical contours of the land. Those who know, through totemic affiliation and initiation, have a mental map of their country, marking out where events of the Dreaming took place,

crisscrossed by lines where the ancestor travelled the sacred tracks between camps and places of significant happening, highlighting the resting places and life centres. The land has a story to tell.

“The European readily speaks about ‘identifying with the land’, but more often that is only a metaphor for affection and solidarity, for it is inherently Western to see land as a separate entity, on which one walks as a superior intelligent being and which one uses as an object for economic gain or pleasure. The Aboriginal Australian speaks of real identity: I am the land! She feels part of a whole; in fact she is part of every other as every other is part of her, such that she is enmeshed with the land in a real dynamic identity. The land is not just the surface, but includes flora, fauna, even celestial bodies, in a corporate organic whole that is as animate, sentient, intelligent, self-conscious and communicative as any of its parts.

“It seems self evident that an authentic Australian spirituality must embrace a sense of sacred land. This land is the ground of my being with God. It is the foundation of my covenantal relationship with my God. It is God’s first gift to me, mediating God’s other gifts of nature and grace. It is a sacrament especially revealing God’s motherliness. Like Aboriginal people I see the land as full of God’s beneficence and an invitation to care for the land. Like them I can experience cosmic compassion and solidarity with the land, to the point where I can say, ‘I am part of it and it is part of me.’”

CHRISTIAN EARTH COMMUNITIES IN COLLABORATION

Eco-justice efforts extend beyond the articulation of a compelling theology and an integrated spirituality. Across Australia there is evidence of Church communities committed to responding at regional and local levels to a wide variety of ecological crises. The banner of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation is raised with confidence. People of religious conviction are engaging the inescapable crises of our age, such as widespread environmental destruction and pollution, soul-destroying poverty and crippling Third World debt. Involvement is diverse, sometimes centred on neighbourhood issues of land, water or air, sometimes extending to global issues of economy, trade and peace-making.

As a faith and ecology initiative, a small group gathers in Melbourne to

see how they might deepen the connection between faith and ecology. The group engages in activities such as preparing materials for distribution to parishes for Environment Day and investigating ways to further nourish the relationship between Catholic belief and ecology.

A voluntary group from educational, welfare and social justice organisations works in Sydney to clarify values and alternatives in social, economic and political issues. The members network on social, economic and political challenges, highlighting Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching perspectives. Among the papers issued before recent elections was one focusing on the principles, issues and alternatives related to the environment and resource management.

An EarthCare Commission has a distinctive focus and role within the Adelaide Archdiocesan social justice structures. It works at educational projects, cooperates with environmental bodies, and makes a special effort at promoting sound spiritual and liturgical possibilities.

Many are committed to the development of The Earth Charter, for submission to the United Nations in 2002. The Charter, or pledge, synthesises basic principles related to Respect for all Life; Care for the Community of Life in all its Diversity; Building Free, Just, Sustainable and Peaceful Societies; and Securing Earth's Abundance and Beauty for Present and Future Generations.

Permaculture is an imaginative and innovative agricultural project begun in Tasmania by Bill Mollison and David Holmgren. They link traditional skills and knowledge of plant, animal and social systems with new ideas. Permaculture is about design; it is about ethics; it is about working with the rhythms of life. The ethic or value system is simple: care for the earth, care for people, distribute surplus, reduce consumption.

A missionary network monitors Australian-based companies with mining concessions in ecologically sensitive areas. Panguna, Ok Tedi and Marinduque remind us that resource development has an impact beyond investment and profit. It touches on human need, poverty, conflict, food security, protection of species, indigenous rights, sacred heritage, sustainability, debt, and a host of other inter-connected issues.

In all corners of the nation, pockets of Christians are nourishing a faith dimension of their commitment to the environment: An eco-theology group works to link ecology, theology and praxis; college students make

earth care a focus in their social projects; research bodies identify the attitudes, values and practices of believers; the contemplative dimensions of integrity of creation are fostered in retreats; networks help to spread reports of crisis situations; and liturgical celebrations play a growing part for many.

4. KEEP A GREEN TREE IN THE HEART AND A SINGING BIRD WILL COME

Often a busy pastoral worker in a parish will seek “ecology in a nutshell”, or a religious coordinator will request “a brief summary of Integrity of Creation”. In all honesty, we must recognise that an adequate start to the ecological journey ahead will need to depend on more than the occasional homily, or a few distributed A4 pages. The greatest resources we bring to our quest for ecological integrity are strong faith, passion for the earth, and a lively imagination. The task calls for the integration of many dimensions of ecology and integrity of creation. This chapter highlights a few major and fascinating perspectives. The end-notes indicate some worthwhile resources.

RENEWING THE EARTH

Some basic questions

How are we called to care for God’s creation? How may we open ourselves more to scripture and tradition, and the religious foundations related to care for the earth? How may we apply our social teaching, with its emphasis on the life and dignity of the human person, to the challenge of protecting the earth, our common home?

What can we in the Catholic community offer to the environmental movement, and what can we learn from it? How can we learn of creation and respect for the earth from indigenous peoples and peoples of the land? Are the voices of women and children heard, and those without a voice? What can we learn from other great religious traditions – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism?

How can we encourage a serious dialogue in the Catholic community – in parishes, in schools, colleges and other settings – on the significant

ethical dimensions of the crisis? How do we proceed to frame a common and workable environmental ethic? What steps can we take to devise a sustainable and just economy? What can we do to link more firmly both the commitment and duties to the environment? How do we secure protection for all of God's creatures, including the poor and the unborn?

What is our shared concern for the rights of the animals of the field and the forest, the birds of the air, the fish in the waters, down to the tiniest creatures? How can the nation act responsibly on global problems? How, in working for a sustainable global economy, do we fulfil our obligations in justice to the poor of the world?

What are the stories of creation and the universe that appeal to us? Do we allow these stories to inspire and affirm us? Do we relate to the God who journeyed with our ancestors? Do we acknowledge the land on which we live and work? How can we draw ecological perspectives into our prayer and celebration? Are we making efforts to drink deeply from the wells of our traditions?

OUR CATHOLIC SOCIAL MISSION

In the quest for ecological integrity, questions with deep cultural and religious roots arise. The issues today certainly call for ecumenical cooperation on a new scale, and widening inter-faith dialogue. People of faith have a role to play in clarifying different perspectives. This presumes openness to diversity and sensitivity to the experience and expertise of others. Being believers means that we live in a certain way – walking with the Lord, doing justice, gently loving and living peaceably on the earth.

Christian discipleship means practising what Jesus preached. It calls for a relationship with Christ and a commitment to his mission of bringing life and good news to the world. Christianity does not call us to withdraw or stand aside from the nitty-gritty world, but to help shape it. It does not mean avoiding worldly tasks and responsibilities, but transforming them. We all have unique talents, gifts from God that we are called on to develop and share. People who use their skills and expertise for the common good, the service of others and the protection of creation are good stewards of the gifts they have been given.

Social justice and the common good are built up, or torn down, day by

day in the countless decisions and choices we make.

As Brian Swimme writes in *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos*: “Unless we live our lives with at least some cosmological awareness, we risk collapsing into tiny worlds. For we can be fooled into thinking that our lives are passed in political entities such as the state or the nation; or that bottom-line concerns of life have to do with economic realities or consumer lifestyles. In truth, we live in the midst of immensities and we are intrinsically woven into a great cosmic drama.”²⁹

ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

In our quest for ecological integrity, we soon discover that the terms “environment”, “ecology” and “integrity of creation” are complex. A clear message emerges: this is not just about feeling good in the natural world. Nor is it about recycling and making the odd adjustment to our lifestyle. It is more than an accommodation between the churches and the green movement. This is about conversion. It involves a change in consciousness about how we relate to ourselves, our world and our God. Paul Collins explains:

“Just as we must undergo a conversion and a change of life if we are to be persons of genuine spiritual conviction and religious faith, so to become ecologically aware we must pass through a real conversion process ... The process varies from individual to individual. It originates in one of two ways: either in an identifiable, specific event or experience through which a whole new attitude to the world dawns; or through a drawn-out process whereby a person gradually becomes aware of a profound permeation of their whole being with the sense that, as human beings, we originated on this earth, that we belong here, and that it is our only home and there is nowhere else to go.”³⁰

A SPIRITUALITY CONNECTED TO THE EARTH

We seek spiritual, intellectual and emotional support in discerning how we can both nourish the earth and be recipients of its bountiful goodness. It is encouraging when we find hope and viable ways of linking faith and ecology.³¹ Resources in scripture, theologies and spiritualities are emerging to provide a base for faith encompassing all living beings and all of creation.³²

The aspect of healing, therapy and reconciliation emerges – healing the earth, healing ourselves; opening self to be nurtured by nature; finding the lost self in the lost earth.³³ Recent eco-theology moves from the dualism of the past to fresh models of relationships in the universe. One writer suggests a model of the universe as God’s body. This is a radical rethinking and re-imagining of our world with the Creator God right at the heart. Here theology is a creative and imaginative interpretation of reality, rather than an explanation of texts.³⁴

Living with reverence upon the earth means having a sacred place to dwell and a fresh story to tell.³⁵ A rich source of insight and inspiration comes from women’s perspectives. Much reflection from “eco-feminism” stresses kinship with the creator spirit, loving and nurturing; reweaving the world with fresh dreams and visions.³⁶

In deep silence we allow the stories of creation, and the stories of God, to inspire and affirm us. We are aware of God’s sustaining presence. We marvel at the limitless vistas and beauty of the universe. We quietly identify what we feel about God’s creation.

Writes Thomas Berry in *The Dream of the Earth*: “Tell me the story of the river and the valley and the streams and the woodlands and the wetlands, of shellfish and finfish. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and the roles we play. Tell me a story that will be my story as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, that story which brings together the human community with every living thing in the valley, a story that brings us together under the arc of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night.”³⁷

A GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

In presenting a global ecological perspective, Christian authors generally begin with the crises and disillusionment with current realities. They ponder the main themes on the global landscape, such as ecology, economics, ethics, politics and peace.³⁸ They ask where we are and why, and seek the spiritual reorientation needed by communities to face unjust and unsustainable uses of power.³⁹

Some writers consider global trends and the shape of the emerging worldview and culture. They seek God in the shadows of the global city.⁴⁰ Others start with an environmental perspective on hunger, pov-

erty, pollution, conflict, genetic engineering, and degradation, and work towards signs of hope.⁴¹ A great emphasis in solving the human predicament is placed on economic reform; putting the earth and its inhabitants back at the centre of economics.⁴² Imaginative approaches emerge, such as an awakening to geo-justice, creating an earth story for our time and making a preferential option for the earth.⁴³

CHALLENGES FOR THE PILGRIM JOURNEY AHEAD

To Discover a Sacred Perspective Relating to the Earth and the Land
To Become a Narrator of the Story of God's Creation
To Learn to Respect the Questions Heard Along the Way
To Name the Sources of our Wisdom for a Climate of Hope
To Choose to Transmit Spiritual Values to the Next Generation

Develop an awareness towards the inter-connectedness of life.
Absorb the traditional narratives of creation and landscape.
Be aware of your own life, respecting it as gifted and unique.
Be conscious of the ways in which we exploit the resources of the earth.
Build solidarity with the poor of the earth and the powerless.
Become people of peace and harmony in situations of conflict.
Identify with the wisdom of the Gospel of Jesus.
Maintain a sense of wonder, enchantment and gratitude for life.

Albert J. LaChance writes in *Embracing Earth*: "Before the beginning was God. When God willed light, the fireball appeared. God's word was within the fireball, and that word became matter. From matter the galaxies came forth. From the galaxies the earth appeared. From the earth came water, and in the water the word became living cells. From living cells organisms appeared – fish, birds, reptiles, insects, mammals, flowers and fruit, marsupials and primates. The word became human and told stories about God. From out of the stories grew tribal, neolithic, classical and technocratic cultures. The word revealed science, and we walked upon the moon. The word became love and insight and meaning in many places and in our time today. Today, the Spirit of God is upon us, inspiring us toward a new understanding of wholeness, of God, of the earth, and of culture."⁴⁴

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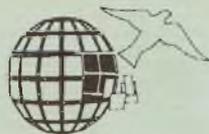
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