

Catholic Wisdom on:

Environment

When Saint Francis of Assisi composed his song of praise, the “Canticle of the Creatures,” he shouted aloud his joy in his brothers and sisters: the sun, the moon, stars, wind, clouds, water, fire, the dear Mother Earth and all her flowers and fruit, and even Sister Death, who gathers in all things that have life and from them gives back life to other creatures. He was celebrating a creation that was not divided into human and non-human but bound together in the web of God’s creative love. That’s why the birds and animals trusted Francis.

But Francis himself was echoing the words of his master, the peasant boy from Nazareth, who proclaimed that the love of his father embraces not only human beings but also every sparrow and wild flower. In his work of healing, for instance, Jesus did not use only words but poured out God’s power through very earthly things like water and spittle and the touch of his hands. Before his death, wanting to share his life in a particular intimacy with his friends and followers, he chose food—bread and wine, powerful symbols of how we humans depend on the good earth for sustenance.

Jesus possessed a profound sense of the interdependence of all created things; he had learned this growing up in a peasant society that depended on working the soil, on rain and sun and good farming. In the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus studied and prayed—our Old Testament—the land and its inhabitants, plants and animals, are shown as interwoven with human creation. In the creation story of Genesis, men and women are presented as part of that creation and are given the job of caring for it. That is at the root of our thinking and praying today about our responsibility for our world. It is true, however, that this command to the first humans to “fill the earth and subdue it” has been interpreted in many different ways. Some have taken it to mean that humans have a right to use the rest of creation for their own purposes, whatever the results. But to the ancient writer, “subdue the earth” did not mean that the earth should be treated as the enemy, to be controlled. In a world where nature was dangerous, cruel, and unpredictable, the words of Genesis reminded humans not to fear the vastness around them, but to learn to use it and care for it as their rightful home.

EMBRACED BY THE KISS OF GOD’S LOVE: Fifty years ago only scientists used the word ecology. Only a few people worried about the effects of industrial pollution or pesticides or intensive chemical farming methods. To most people, such things were the acceptable price we paid for growing wealth. Thus it is not surprising that we don’t find warnings about ecological sin in theology books of the past. We will look in vain for centuries-old papal encyclicals on the environment, and yet the roots of what the church is saying today were always there. Among others, the great St. Thomas Aquinas affirmed the diversity of all creatures, not just humans, as the necessary expression of God’s being. Many mystics and saints adored God in creation. St. Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century mystic who was also a musician and scientist, wrote, “The entire world has been embraced by the kiss of God’s love.”

But Hildegard also warned that when people are envious and greedy then “in the people that were meant to be green...there is only shriveled barrenness.” In a chillingly prophetic passage she described “the filthy uncleanness of the peoples, a fog that is the source of many destructive and barren creatures that destroy and damage the earth, rendering it incapable of sustaining humanity.” Through the centuries Catholic people knew, deep down, that humans were part of creation and dependent on other creatures. For generation after generation the sacraments affirmed and reaffirmed that God’s life is given to us through very earthly things—bread, wine, oil, water, human bodies in marriage, hands of blessing. Now Catholic wisdom is pushing us to spell it all out beyond mistake.

What went wrong? When the “Age of Reason” in the 17th and 18th centuries opened up wonderful possibilities in science and invention, it also emphasized a separation between the spiritual and the material. Man (it was “man”: woman wasn’t supposed to have the brains for it) could understand the universe and, eventually, control it. God, if there was one, had merely created it all as a clockmaker makes and winds up a clock, and after that it goes by itself. Nonhuman nature was to be regarded as man’s “slave” to be exploited for human benefit—or rather, for the benefit of some humans, since the inventions of the industrial age brought great wealth but also unprecedented poverty and misery. The 19th century thought of itself as the Age of Progress, bringing greater scientific power, manufacturing capacity, and prosperity. But in the 20th century, as wars and profit-driven global trade destroyed cultures and ecosystems, voices began to be raised. As time went on, the few lonely voices became a chorus: scientists, farmers, fishermen, doctors, people working in remote jungles and in inner cities. They began to document what was happening. Here are just some of the facts that have been established:

- Of today’s world’s plant and animal species (estimated to be over 4 million), one quarter may become extinct during the next century.
- The burning of fossil fuels causes acid rain, which destroys forests and fish; these fuels are also implicated in the increase in illnesses such as asthma.
- Chemical compounds widely used in refrigeration, industrial solvents, air conditioning, and other things cause destruction of the ozone layer, which protects the earth from harmful ultraviolet rays. The area of ozone destruction is growing and expected to result in more human skin cancer and cataracts, damage to ecosystems, and decline in agriculture, meaning food that will be less and less healthful.
- The disposal of toxic waste—nuclear and chemical—has become a long-term danger. Most people also don’t know that ordinary things like paints, drain cleaners, and lawn chemicals can pose risks to our health and to the environment.
- A high proportion of both production and dumping of hazardous chemicals occurs in areas of minority population. Three out of five African Americans or Hispanic Americans live in communities with at least one toxic waste site.

- Recent research has demonstrated an increase in sterility and genital deformities in male fish, frogs, alligators, and humans, all traced to chemical pollution.

Unfortunately, this list is only a fragment of the conclusions of established scientific research on the effects of pollution of air, water, and soil. There are questions, and research continues, but the scientific consensus is growing.

EVERYONE'S RESPONSIBILITY: Thomas Berry, a respected Catholic writer and environmentalist, has summed up the sadness and fear Christians feel. "We have changed the very chemistry of the planet," he writes, "structures and functions that have taken hundreds of millions, and even billions, of years to bring into existence." But Berry warns that losing the richness of life around us will not only endanger our physical existence but also dry up our spiritual sense, impoverishing our precious sacramental awareness that allows us to know God in ourselves and in all we see, touch, eat, hear, and smell. The Catholic voice is getting louder, as bishops' conferences and the pope call on governments to act against those who would continue to destroy our future—spiritual as well as physical—for short-term gain.

Pope John Paul II has spoken out about the moral urgency of responding to the ecological crises. He warns against "indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology" without taking responsibility for harmful long-term effects. He knows some of the damage is already irreversible and calls for "a new solidarity" between nations to preserve what can still be saved. He says this is "the responsibility of everyone." He recognizes a new ecological awareness "that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past." The U.S. Catholic bishops in 1991 issued a statement called "Renewing the Earth," which emphasizes that we face an urgent moral challenge we cannot rightly refuse, and all over the world bishops' conferences call for awareness and action. All of them make clear that the church cannot separate justice for human beings from justice for the earth. We are woven into the fabric of creation. If we unravel the fabric, we destroy ourselves.

The very urgency and danger of our situation calls us to repentance. But Catholic wisdom also calls us to hope—hope for a world a little nearer to the reign of God. Yet in the face of such danger, we can feel paralyzed and helpless. Is it all too big for us? Can we evade responsibility by blaming big business and government? Not according to our modern prophets, who have been calling us to true repentance by turning to new actions. Long ago, the prophet Hosea linked human evil and environmental destruction: "There is no good faith or mutual trust, no knowledge of God in the land, oaths are imposed and broken, they kill and rob, there is nothing but indecency and license, one dead of blood after another—therefore the land shall be dried up, all who live on it shall pine away and with them the wild beasts and birds of the air, even the fish shall be swept from the sea."

If this terrible prophecy is to be avoided, what shall we do? First, we have to understand and tell one another that, although some of the damage is indeed irreversible, humans can together protect and cherish our still beautiful earth. Then we have to recognize, as Catholic teachers and bishops and scientists tell us, that we have to make choices. If big corporations are destructive of the environment, and therefore our lives and our children's lives, that is because we support them, even demand it of them, by our buying choices, wastefulness, and ignorance. We often don't know or show that we care about how the things we buy are produced, whether they are items of food or clothing, toys, or building materials for our homes. We as citizens, consumers, and Christians can change that.

The resolve to change begins with exercising our political responsibility by voting and asking our legislators to support bills that protect our future. We need to examine our habits of consumption and express to retailers and manufacturers our concerns about environmental costs of production processes. We can choose to pay a bit more for healthy, organically grown foods or items produced under healthy conditions, thus supporting the courageous people who do produce in responsible ways. And we can choose to consume less; our country uses up one third of all the earth's products. Do we really need all we buy? Do we teach our children to enjoy life or just to grab things? If we have the space, we can grow our own foods or join in creating community gardens. Another important step is to avoid waste and to stop being part of the "throwaway" society. Recycle, reuse, and mend!

If our world can face up to its danger, heed the call to conversion, and make different choices, it may be that the terrible danger we face can motivate us to work together to create a new era of peace and of care for each other and for the earth. The wisdom of Christian and Hebrew tradition and the strong prophetic voices of Catholics in our own time are guiding us in new and wonderful ways. "And God saw that it was good." We can be faithful to God's vision, in the power of the Spirit.