



AN EMERGING CATHOLIC VOICE

Something important, but often overlooked, is happening in the relationship between religious faith and environmental concerns. Over the last decade, a distinctively Catholic voice has been articulated, a voice that links traditional church teaching on creation and the common good, social justice and stewardship to major environmental questions and challenges.

This developing reality is seen and heard in the efforts of parishes, dioceses, national Catholic organizations, schools and universities, and special initiatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Among these efforts are the following:

- In the Northwest, the bishops issued a major pastoral reflection on the Columbia River that offers a moral vision of pursuing the common good in the midst of polarization and conflict

- In Florida, the dioceses are urging community-wide effort to better protect precious limited water supplies, especially the Everglades

- In many Catholic hospitals, a new sense of environmental responsibility is shaping policy and practice

- In the National Council of Catholic Women, local Catholic women's groups are addressing environmental health hazards and threats to poor children, such as lead and asthma

Since the Bishops' 1991 Pastoral Letter, U.S. Catholics Have Become a Force for Environmental Protection

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- In Washington, the USCCB is helping to shape the debate about how to balance a respect for private property and the demands of the common good

The bishops' 1991 pastoral letter, *Renewing the Earth*,¹ and their June 2001 statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*,² offer moral principles, policy criteria, and an ethic of responsibility and restraint as a foundation of a renewed environmental ethic in the Catholic community.

This fall, the USCCB's Environmental Justice Program marks its 10th anniversary. The program is a substantive and sustained response by the U.S. bishops to the environmental challenge of Pope John Paul II. The bishops are seeking to create an authentically Catholic voice in the environmental debate, one that focuses on the human person's place in nature and that puts the needs of the poor and vulnerable front and center. It is a distinctive voice. We insist that "we are not the environmental movement at prayer."

This new voice has old roots. It builds on those who came before us, providing values for our own spirituality and action related to the environment. The life of St. Francis of Assisi demonstrates a love for the poor and other creatures that can help inspire us to find a way to care for the Earth and the wretched of the earth. It is not surprising that Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis the patron of ecology. What is remarkable is that so many others, including nonbelievers, see St. Francis as a source of inspiration. However, too few of us have heeded his wisdom.

The continuing task now is to make the church's teaching on the environment better known and available to Catholics and the broader community. The bishops' program has produced three sets of resources, which have been sent to all 19,000 U.S. Catholic parishes. The USCCB



has also sponsored several gatherings of Catholic scholars and has encouraged Catholic universities to explore the richness of Catholic theology and the implications of its social teachings for the environment. Catholic social teaching, with its emphasis on respect for human dignity, promotion of the common good, and a special care for the poor, can be a needed corrective to polarizing and partisan public debate on environmental issues.

A VOICE ON BEHALF OF THE POOR

A defining element of the church's contribution to the environmental debate is its call for a priority for the poor in environmental choices. The poor are clearly more vulnerable than other people to environmental deterioration. Poor families often live on the margins of society: in urban areas where their housing is poor, or in rural areas where the land is of poor quality, overused, in flood plains, or subject to drought. They often live near toxic dumps, where housing is cheaper. Some poor workers hold jobs that people of higher incomes would not consider, jobs that expose them directly to environmental toxics. In debates about the environment, the poor and vulnerable workers are often out of sight and have no voice.

In serving the poor, the Catholic community has increasingly focused on environmental justice. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is providing resources to those projects tackling farm-worker pesticide issues and helping poorer communities struggle with environmental health problems. Catholic Charities USA is training housing counselors to help low-income mothers learn how to protect their children from household toxic materials. Catholic hospitals and health care facilities, which serve many poorer communities, are finding ways to lessen the harmful effects of medical waste treatment and address health threats resulting from environmental damage.

In June 2001, the U.S. bishops issued a statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*. The bishops insist that one need not know everything about the science of climate change to realize that it poses serious consequences for people and the planet. The virtue of prudence calls for action on behalf of future generations. The search for the common good is often overwhelmed by powerful competing interests and polarizing claims and tactics. The voices of poor people and

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poor countries are missing as choices and policies are debated and decided. The special needs of the poor must not be lost sight of as the richer countries struggle over the potential costs to their own societies and interests.

THE VOICE OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

This Catholic environmental justice initiative is not simply a convening of Catholics already committed to environmental concerns. Its foundation is the conviction that stewardship is everyone's responsibility and care for creation is every believer's duty. Program resources focus not just at the national level but also on parishes, dioceses, and other national Catholic organizations seeking to engage Catholics by helping them to integrate concern for the environment within the broader context of living their faith. The bishops urge not an exclusive or narrow focus on the environment, but seek rather a way that a mostly urban and a diverse (culturally, racially, and geographically) community of faith can harness its ethical values and everyday experience to live more in harmony with creation.

This Catholic effort has been greatly assisted and encouraged by the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, a remarkable interfaith collaboration of Protestant, Evangelical, and Jewish leaders (see www.nrpe.org). This inter-religious effort is not about settling for a lowest common denominator agenda or uttering pious platitudes. Rather, it helps each member community to pursue faithfully its own path and approach, while uniting to build a stronger voice for the larger religious community in environmental dialogue.

This focus on integration is making a difference. Other articles in this issue of *Health Progress* explore the work done by Catholic health care organizations. These efforts are making a critical difference in the protection of people and the environment. At the regional levels, bishops are addressing specific concerns. The bishops of the Northwest issued a major pastoral statement on the Columbia River. Likewise, the bishops of New England and New Mexico have issued pastoral statements addressing their communities' concerns with fisheries and water. These and other efforts by Catholic organizations and local bishops help build leadership, capacity, and momentum.

The church often plays the role of convenor, pulling elements of diverse communities together to search for the common good. In Connecticut,



for example, under the leadership of the Archdiocese of Hartford, dioceses are pulling together a coalition of civic, low-income, and environmental groups to address urban sprawl and its impact on the community and land. In this instance, the church is playing a key role in helping the entire community face a critical concern.

Iowa dioceses and the National Catholic Rural Life Conference are assisting local communities face the negative environmental impacts of large-scale hog farming. Some Iowans are Catholics who own or contract to operate large hog farms. Others suffer directly from the air and water pollution generated by large-scale hog farming. Some have lost their small farms to larger corporate hog farms. The church is again playing an important role by convening the stakeholders to consider larger questions and consequences.

Major Catholic organizations—including hospitals, Catholic Charities agencies, schools, women's groups, and other institutions—have come together to form the Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment. The coalition addresses basic environmental health and safety issues, particularly as they affect children. This effort represents a major institutional commitment to deal with issues such as asthma and poisoning from lead, mercury, and pesticides.

Collectively, U.S. dioceses have over 80,000 buildings. Retrofitting or building new facilities that are more environmentally safe would be a major contribution by the Catholic community. Such retrofitting would substantially lower energy consumption and help maintain environmental health. These efforts are complimented by the ongoing work of religious communities to make their buildings environmentally safer.

THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

Ten years into this important effort, we can see that there are significant future challenges. Catholic thought and spirituality need to explore more deeply the unique place of the human person in nature and the larger web of life. Extremes need to be resisted. Some people espouse an almost independent divine status for nature, with no reference to the unique dignity of the human person or the need for development. This view drains away a truly reverential attitude toward and respect for nature. The Catholic tradition neither divinizes nor denigrates the natural world, nor does it displace human needs. The Catholic tradition rejects a simple utilitarian view of nature that relativizes all of life and creation. The church rec-

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ognizes that humans are part of nature. No environmental ethic will be satisfactory without a clearer perspective on the place of humans within nature and a better understanding of the moral responsibilities of caring for creation.

In today's world, dominated as it is by polarizing political arguments and special interests, the Catholic tradition emphasizing the common good needs to be further identified, explored, and pursued. In a polarized world, one side wins and the other loses. The common good refocuses our perspective on the need to move beyond special interests and narrow political motives to assume a common responsibility for the future of our planet. Environmental stewardship is a fundamental exercise in solidarity.

The neglected needs of the poor have to take priority. The rhetoric of environmental justice must become real in policies, resources, and priorities. Scientific research, policy analysis, and ethical reflection must get deeper, more specific, and more concrete. We must collectively find a way to give expression to the voices, needs and hurts of the poor and vulnerable, if we are to integrate the search for social justice and environmental wholeness.

Since 1993, the U.S. Catholic bishops have been building a network of concern for the environment. The environment is an issue with a long-term horizon. There is yet much to learn after these 10 years. We must recommit ourselves for the longer journey to make environmental justice an integral part of the lives of the members of the Catholic community. This effort, if fruitful, will express itself in our prayer and thinking, our work and investments. We must all take to heart the challenge of Pope John Paul II: "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be *the responsibility of everyone.*"³ □

NOTES

1. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, in Patrick W. Carey, ed., *Pastoral Letters and Statements of the United States Catholic Bishops*, vol. 6, U.S. Catholic Conference, Washington, DC, 1998, p. 398.
2. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Global Climate Changes: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*, June 15, 2001, available at www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/globalclimate.htm
3. John Paul II, "And God Saw That It Was Good," *The Pope Speaks*, May-June 1990, pp. 205-206.

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