Sustaining God’s Creation

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This issue of Health Progress has as its theme “Environmental Responsibility and the Ministry.” As you might recall, environmental issues have been a concern of mine for several years (see “Needed: A Warning System for Environmental Health Risks, Health Progress, September-October 1999, pp. 8-9). Previously, I reflected on the environment from the perspective of health care-related consequences associated with the misuse of the environment. This column will consider the environment from the perspective of theology and religious experience.

An excellent resource for such a consideration is the 1991 pastoral statement on the environment. Entitled Renewing the Earth, the pastoral sought to “add a distinctive and constructive voice to the ecological dialogue... particularly with the scientific community.” A quite helpful component of the document is its presentation of what its authors consider to be the distinctive perspective the Catholic ethical tradition brings to environmental issues. Elements of that perspective are:

- A God-centered and sacramental view of the universe, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth
- A consistent respect for human life, which extends to respect for all of creation
- A world view affirming the ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good
- An ethics of solidarity promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community
- An understanding of the universal purpose of created things, which requires equitable use of the earth’s resources
- An option for the poor, which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world
- A conception of authentic development, which offers a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth

The Problem Resides in Us

Clearly, we have a rich tradition that should be a helpful resource, as well as an inspiration, for our environment efforts. In fact, one could question why, with such a rich heritage, environmental advocacy is not more central to the Catholic community in general and Catholic health care in particular.

Several years ago, the late Bishop James Mal...
one of Youngstown, OH, offered two possible explanations. First, he writes, since “the misuse and abuse of our environment is so pervasive . . . we should begin with the assumption that you and I are part of the problem, that the problem resides in us.” He goes on to propose that, if we accept that possibility, then:

We quickly realize that each of us have been impacted by the atomized individualism of a society that allows an individual to dump their trash on a roadside because that is a convenient time and place; that we are imbued with a spirit of consumerism that drives us to purchase what we do not need and have no way to dispose of; that we are driven by the American myth of progress, which insists that bigger is better and there is plenty of land or space to house it; and finally that we have bought into the technological mindset that says if something can be done, it must be done now no matter what the consequences.

But this is not the whole story. Bishop Malone (influenced by the writings of Fr. Michael Himes, OSF, and Fr. Kenneth Himes, OSF) goes on to say that not only are we part of the problem, because of the influence of the culture in which we live; the Christian tradition has contributed to our becoming part of the problem because:

The Christian tradition has taken one aspect of the Genesis account of creation and distorted it in such a fashion as to have contributed to a cosmology that supports the exploitation of the environment. By focusing on the twin themes of our being made in the image of God and having been given the responsibility of subduing the earth and all creatures, our tradition has sustained an image of humanity having an unlimited sovereignty and dominion over creation. Even what would appear to be a counterbalance, namely the concept of stewardship, contributes to the problem. This is because the purpose of stewarding God’s creation in the end is to provide for the good of humanity. Is it any wonder then that it was the Christian West, which was the cradle of an industrial revolution, that uncritically began an assault on the environment?

If the bishop is correct (and I suspect he is), then we have both an individual and a cultural bias toward environmental abuse to overcome. As Catholic health care providers, we have then a dual responsibility for changing both our attitude and our behavior in ways that sustain the environment.

CHANGING OUR BEHAVIOR
First, all health care providers, regardless of affiliation, are a part of the problem because the ways in which modern health care is delivered have a significant impact on the environment. According to CHA’s soon-to-be-published document, Environmental Responsibility and the Catholic Health Care Ministry, today’s health care delivery generates some 7,000 tons of waste per day in the United States. Medical waste incineration is the third largest source of dioxin emissions and the fourth largest source of mercury emissions (see Jayne Mardock, “Cleaning Up Our ‘Environmental Footprints,’” pp. 18, 20).

Second, as Catholic health care providers, we have a moral responsibility to foster the health and well-being of our communities. This must include minimizing our own damage to the environment.

Bishop Malone, citing a 1990 article by Frs. Michael and Kenneth Himes, writes that “creation, all of it, can be said to be a sacrament because it makes present, makes real the love of God.” Bishop Malone found inspiration for greater spirituality around creation and protecting the environment in the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi. He believed the Franciscan insight—equality of all creatures and reverence due all creatures—provides a key to our spiritual conversion.
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SUSTAINING GOD’S CREATION

In an address to a 1997 convention on the environment and health, Pope John Paul II noted humanity’s “inconsiderate exploitation of creation that is a result of human insensitivity.” He called for a review of lifestyles based on “firm points of reference and inspiration: a clear knowledge of creation as a work of God’s provident wisdom and the awareness of human dignity and responsibility in the plan of creation.”

Nearly five years later, he spoke in a general address of an “ecological conversion which in the last few decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophies we are moving toward.” John Paul II added that such conversion must go beyond protecting the physical environment and aim at creating a “human ecology which makes the existence of every creature more dignified, protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations and preparing for future generations an environment closer to that which God planned. . . . Men and women will once again walk in the garden of creation, working to ensure that the goods of the earth are available to all, and not just to a privileged few.”

Although the Catholic health care ministry has done much to meet its environmental responsibilities, as leaders in the health care field and in the Catholic Church, we must continue to work individually and collectively to minimize the impact of our footprints on the environment and to fulfill our role in sustaining God’s creation.

REFLECTIONS
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