

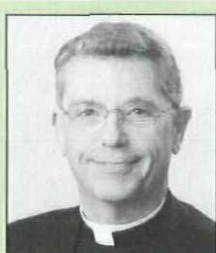
# Sustaining God's Creation

BY FR. MICHAEL D. PLACE, STD

**T**his 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."<sup>1</sup> 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



*Fr. Place is president and chief executive officer, Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.*

- 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-

## CHA Activities Related to Environmental Responsibility

Guided by the ministry's concern for environmental responsibility, CHA has:

- Convened Catholic health care systems around issues related to children's health and the environment and other environmental concerns; CHA is now working together to reduce mercury use by facilities

- Invited ministry-wide participation in Hospitals for a Healthy Environment activities related to waste reduction and mercury use

- Is helping to plan CleanMed 2004, an annual health

care conference on environmentally preferable products and green buildings, which will include a session for ministry leaders in attendance

- Helped establish the Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment.

- Promotes environmental responsibility through educational programming, exhibits, and articles in publications

- Is publishing the booklet, *Environmental Responsibility and the Catholic Health Care Ministry*

For more information, contact Julie Trocchio at CHA, 202-296-3993 or [jtrocchio@chausa.org](mailto:jtrocchio@chausa.org)

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 steward-

ship, 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?<sup>3</sup>

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.

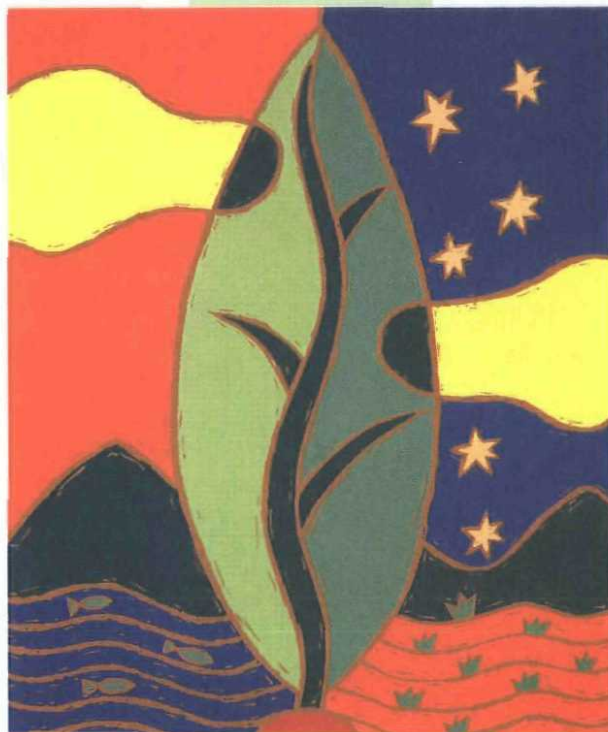
#### CHANGING OUR BEHAVIOR

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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 cre-

*Continued on page 16*



#### A Work of God’s Provident Wisdom

“We wait for new heavens and a new earth” (2 Pt 3:13). With regard to the inconsiderate exploitation of creation that is a result of human insensitivity, our current society will not find an adequate solution unless it seriously reviews its life-style and manages to base it 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.*”

—Pope John Paul II,

“Message for the 23rd World Day  
of Tourism 2002”



## Revitalizing the Practice of Leadership

### JOIN THE LEADERSHIP PILGRIMAGE PROGRAM

The Seton Cove, an interfaith spirituality center, presents the Leadership Pilgrimage, a year-long program designed to help leaders reflect on their work, renew their spirits and revitalize their understanding and practice of leadership. This exciting new program consists of a series of three, 3-day retreats beginning in February 2004.

#### 2004 LEADERSHIP PILGRIMAGE RETREATS\*

Feb. 26-28

Jun. 3-5

Sep. 30 - Oct. 2

The Canyon of the Eagles Resort and Retreat Center, located in the beautiful Hill Country right outside of Austin, Texas.

\*Program commitment is for three retreats.

#### RETREAT FACILITATORS

Russ Moxley with the Courage to Teach program and author of *Leadership and Spirit*; Patricia Speier and Anne Province with Seton Cove

For program details, please visit

[www.seton.net/learningtolead](http://www.seton.net/learningtolead)

To register, call (512) 451-0272

or email [setoncove@seton.org](mailto:setoncove@seton.org).

Registration deadline: Nov. 14, 2003



THE SETON COVE  
A Spirituality Center

A member of the  
SETON Healthcare Network

[www.setoncove.net](http://www.setoncove.net)

## REFLECTIONS

Continued from page 7

ation—should provide Catholics with “a spirituality that can expand the human imagination and sustain a movement to restore and protect our environment.”<sup>5</sup>

However, it is not enough to merely have a new vision of how we relate to the world in which we live. This appreciation must lead to changing our actions as well. Our actions must stretch our organizations to reach higher goals for minimizing our impact on the environment. Our actions must be witness to our change of heart. Only through a commitment to effective action that stems from a “spirituality of creation” can we break through the inertia of our cultural bias and take personal and organizational responsibility to be “companions to all of God’s creation.”

As a ministry, we are taking these actions together. Many Catholic health care organizations are committed to environmental efforts. Facilities within Catholic Healthcare West, for example, are reducing their consumption of natural resources and even redesigning buildings to better protect the environment (see Roger W. Hite, “Health Care in an Age of Ecology,” p. 33). Ministry-wide, organizations recycle and reuse, focus on reducing mercury use, and reward employees for creative ideas leading to greater environmental responsibility. Catholic health systems work together (and with their vendors) to be better environmental stewards, including participation in an effort to reduce use of PVC (polyvinyl chlorides). We collaborate closely with other organizations, such as Hospitals for a Healthy Environment (H2E) and Health Care without Harm. CHA also helped establish the Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment. In June 2003, CHA was pleased to become an H2E “Champion” (see Laura Brannen, “Managing Medical Waste,” p. 25).

#### 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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 catastrophes we are moving toward.”<sup>7</sup> 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.

#### 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. James Malone, “Sister Moon, Brother Fox,” address at Wheeling Jesuit University, Wheeling, WV, June 1, 1992.
3. Malone.
4. Malone.
5. Malone.
6. John Paul II, “Environment Must Be Protected,” *The Pope Speaks*, September-October 1997 p. 293.
7. John Paul II, “Message for the 23rd World Day of Tourism,” September 27, 1992, available at [www.an.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/tourism/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20026625\\_xxiii-giornata-mondale-turismo\\_en.html](http://www.an.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/tourism/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20026625_xxiii-giornata-mondale-turismo_en.html).

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

[www.chausa.org](http://www.chausa.org)

# HEALTH PROGRESS®

---

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, November-December 2003  
Copyright © 2003 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States

---