



THE EARTH IS OUR "HOUSEHOLD"

It seems in recent years that our language has been inundated with words beginning with "eco": eco-consciousness, eco-psychology, eco-renovation, eco-sensitive, and others. Many of these we let pass without much thought—until we see or hear "eco" attached to words we consider sacred, words such as "eco-spirituality" and "eco-theology." That not only catches our attention; it causes some of us particular discomfort.

Why do we squirm when we hear "eco-spirituality" or "Earth-spirituality"? Why do we question all the emphasis Earth seems to be getting? Why, for example, do we object when we see the word Earth capitalized? It is, after all, a proper noun. We capitalize the names of all the other planets.

There is undoubtedly a growing Earth-consciousness permeating every faith tradition, every profession, and every field of study. And when new ideas present themselves, we often have to construct new words in order to get people to pay attention to those ideas. Thus we see "eco" in front of almost anything. Oh, for the time when that will no longer be necessary—when everyone will understand that, whether said or unsaid, "eco" is the point of everything!

*The Church
Has Long
Understood
That True
Health Care
Requires
Protection of
the
Environment*

**BY SR. SHARON
ZAYAC, OP**

HOUSEHOLD EARTH

"Eco" comes from the Greek word *oikos*, which means "household." It means "home." And home refers to the entire house—the whole planet Earth. "Economy" refers to managing the household, a task at which, it is safe to say, we are miserably failing. "Ecology" means understanding all the relationships that make up the household. And humans are not the *only* denizens of the house.

Placing "eco" in front of a noun simply acknowledges (or jolts us into realizing) that everything we are as humans, everything we do as humans, is always and only within the context of the whole household, the whole planet. We live and function as one species within and among all the other species. What we choose to do, how we choose to live, affects, even alters the lives of every other member of the household, often in ways we are only now discovering.

We humans are not separate from the air, water, or soil. We are neither autonomous nor independent from the bacteria that sustain all life on Earth, from the plants which nourish our bodies and spirits, from the many other creatures with whom we share our home. In fact, there is no such thing as autonomy or independence in this universe. Quantum physics has blown apart our old image of independent life forms making their way in a competitive and hostile world.

Science is confirming our absolute connection to the rest of creation at the most basic level we know, the atomic level. Since Earth's creation from stardust some five billion years ago, no new atoms have been introduced to this planet other than those that have come from the occasional meteors that enter our atmosphere. That means that the entire created order of Earth has been sharing the same atoms over and over again in what can be called the ultimate recycling. And



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this sharing goes on even in our lifetime. We humans have a totally new atomic body at least once every seven years.

One of quantum physics' most astounding discoveries is that subatomic particles exist, not by themselves, but in relationship to one another. The existence of these particles (with wonderful names like "quark" and "lepton") cannot be defined except in their relationship with one another. There is no such thing as independence or separateness at the atomic level—and, therefore, at any other level either.

The fundamental reality of the universe is interdependence. It is relationship. We live in a universe of relationships. To be is to be in relationship with the whole because we are one Earth entity. In spite of what we think and how we act, we humans do not live apart from the rest of creation. The household of Earth is the context in which we work. All issues are, in reality, household issues. Any activity we undertake is ecological work because it is performed in the context of life on this planet. Any work that commits to fostering right relationships within the household is ecological justice.

Earth is in crisis. The multitude of problems coming at us from every direction is almost overwhelming. All our attempts to find solutions will be in vain, however, until we frame the proposed solutions within the context of the entire community of Earth. This means that we must grapple with the complexities of relationships that connect us all to one another. We must commit ourselves to understanding how all the members of our one household, human and other-than-human, are affected by our actions.

Earth is the primary reference point from which we must consider all issues. It does not make sense any other way. Eco-spirituality acknowledges that we are not the only members of the household that are precious to God. Just as eco-theology is the discussion of God's intimate relationship with the entire created order, eco-psychology acknowledges that until we reconnect ourselves to Earth from whom we have come and whose destiny we share, we cannot be healthy, we cannot be whole, we cannot be sane.

ECOLOGY AND THE CHURCH

Is this really a new understanding that we have come to? Or is it an understanding that we long held as church but have forgotten in these last few centuries? What does the church say about our role within creation and the ecological crisis? Actually, there are a surprising number of recent encyclicals and pastoral letters that address the ecological concerns of Pope John Paul II and the bishops here in our country and around the

world. Their concerns may be newly expressed, but they rest solidly on the Catholic tradition of a profound Earth-consciousness.

John Paul II has given us poignant instruction on our relationship to creation. As early as 1979, in his encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, he notes the alarming depletion of Earth's resources and warns us against needless exploitation. In 1987, in *Sollicitudo rei socialis (On Social Concern)*, he speaks of respect for the natural world and of the mutual connection of all created things in the cosmos. And in *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation* (1990), he devotes his entire message to the ecological crisis. The pope names it as a common responsibility and grants it a moral standing. The ecological crisis is a moral crisis, he argues. He again warns that consumerism and instant self-gratification are the root causes of the crisis and that no solution will be found until modern society takes a serious look at its lifestyle. He reminds us of our serious obligation to care for ourselves, others, and the entire Earth.

In 2002, John Paul II joined with Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople and issued a pastoral letter entitled *We Are Still Betraying the Mandate God Has Given Us*. The letter calls us to an inner change of heart, which can then lead us to a change in lifestyle and in our unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. And as recently as May of this year, the Holy See called for ecological conversion to combat world poverty.

The world's bishops, including our own here in the United States, have been very vocal about the ecological crisis and its ramifications for their people, the land, and for all of creation. The U.S. bishops have issued more than 20 pastoral letters in the last several decades highlighting their concerns about global climate change, air pollution, loss of wetlands, radioactive and toxic waste sites, the dairy farm crisis, chemical threats to farmers and migrant workers, poisoned water, loss of family farms, and the threat of economic collapse in rural areas.

In 1991 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued the pastoral letter *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in the Light of Catholic Social Teaching*. It is a wonderfully written document, calling us to examine how we use the goods of Earth and what we are passing on to future generations. The U.S. bishops highlight six ecological goals and encourage us to reflect upon the ethical dimensions of the crisis and to promote a just and sustainable vision for the world community.

In *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995), the bishops of Appalachia speak of the new task before us: to form sustainable communities in which people and land are woven together. The Appalachian bishops say we must develop sustain-

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able livelihoods in creative communion with the land, air, water, and all God's holy creatures. In *The Columbia Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* (2001), the bishops of the Pacific Northwest remind us that we live in the world of nature—not apart from it—and that we can live in greater harmony with our surroundings if we strive to become more aware of our connection to and responsibility for creation.

The bishops of New Zealand, Guatemala, Quebec, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Northern Italy, and Australia have written very moving statements about our relationship to Earth and of our sinful assault on creation, an assault that is contrary to the teachings of our faith.

Why are the bishops making the environment a topic for pastoral letters, writing with such passion and conviction? Because they see at first hand what environmental destruction has done to their lands and, therefore, to the lives and welfare of their people. And they stand squarely upon the rich tradition of a church that respects creation as a divine gift of God's goodness.

In *Renewing the Earth*, the U.S. bishops write:

We believe that the following themes drawn from this tradition are integral dimensions of ecological responsibility:

- *A God-centered and sacramental view of the universe*, which grounds human accountability for the fate of Earth
- *A consistent respect for human life*, which extends to respect for all creation
- *A worldview affirming the ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good*
- *An ethic 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 our 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 growth¹

Our respect for creation, however, long predates the documents noted above. And though Thomas Aquinas, writing in the 13th century, was far from the first to articulate that respect, he certainly did it with a style unlike most others. What does Thomas tell us about creation? Creation, he says, is a manifestation of the divine

goodness. All creatures bear the image of the Creator. All creatures bear a trace of the Trinity, no matter how imperfect or faint. And what one creature fails to tell us about God, another creature does. That is why we need the whole universe, "because the whole multiple and varied universe manifests the divine goodness more perfectly than any single creature could do."²

Furthermore, Thomas tells us that everything exists in its own right and is to be taken seriously. All creation is in relationship to the Creator. God is present in all creation, and if we want to pay tribute to the Creator, we must respect the concrete reality, the essence of all things. To do this, Thomas says, is more spiritual than to deny or play down the goodness of things in order to exalt some supernatural thing.

This understanding of the intimate relationship between God and creation underscores the claim of Pope John Paul II and the bishops that environmental degradation is a moral issue. The loss of ecosystems and plant and animal species is no less than a destruction of a facet of the divine expression. God is diminished, and God must feel the pain of that loss.

The ecological crisis is a cosmic crisis. It affects all parts of creation, every member of the household. By the very nature of our universe, no one thing can remain untouched by the other. Every action we take, every choice we make, has its ramifications throughout the entire created order. That places a heavy responsibility upon us to ensure that what we choose to do is mutually beneficial to all of creation.

We are an incredibly creative and intelligent species. We have a collective wisdom gained from our 10,000 years of living together in communities. We must not forsake that wisdom for short-term profit or gain. We have created the technology that is wreaking havoc in the natural world. Relying on that collective wisdom, we must use our technology to ensure that our efforts to make a better life for ourselves include a better life for the entire community of Earth.

HEALTH CARE AND ECOLOGY

What does all this have to do with health care? People involved in health care actually have a starring role. I applaud the efforts you make to address your own issues of toxic materials, disposables, and the reduction of the mountains of waste which must be land-filled, sterilized, incinerated, or trucked off. Having spent 13 years in hospital administration (the last six as a CEO), I recognize the monumental challenges of the task, particularly when so much of it is mired in politics and not common sense. But it is certainly worth

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the effort, financially as well as morally.

The effort will not succeed, however, without the commitment and enthusiastic support of the facility's administration, specifically the CEO. A health care institution's eco-conversion is not just one more project to take on. It is the context in which all health care organizations must organize and operate. We have an excellent medical care system in this country. Our response to medical crises is second to none. What we do *not* have is an adequate health care system. We do not care for people's health. We care for their injuries and for their illnesses.

We will not be true providers of health care until we understand that our well-being is contingent upon clean air and water, healthy soils and food, toxin-free clothing and plastics and metals and building materials. If the planet around us is not healthy, then neither are we. We have an obligation to speak out for the health of the entire household. And if the very buildings in which we gather the sick are not healthy, what service do we provide? We must take on the task of reducing or eliminating what we can and challenging the many industries who supply us to live up to their responsibilities as well.

All our medicines, all our surgeries, all our interventions to make people well will be in vain until we understand the connection that binds us to the whole. I challenge the health care system in this country to take the lead in educating and promoting a mutually sustaining and healthy planet. □

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, pp. 404-405.
2. Paul J. Glenn, *A Tour of the Summa*, B. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, 1960, pp. 42.

CLEANING UP OUR "ENVIRONMENTAL FOOTPRINTS"

Continued from page 21

- Looking for products that are easier to recycle or return to the manufacturer

- Buying PVC- and DEHP-free products, when alternatives exist

WORKING WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

The Catholic health ministry, through participation in several national efforts aimed at reducing the harm from the health care industry, has become increasingly committed to environmental stewardship. Through their involvement in HCWH and H2E, Catholic facilities have access to a wide range of materials and expertise that will help them become more sensitive to environmental problems (see **Box**, p. 21).

GROUP PURCHASING ORGANIZATIONS

A GPO can be another important ally for facilities seeking to become more environmentally responsible. In October 2002 four large GPOs—Premier, Inc.; Novation; Broadlane; and Consorta—committed themselves to providing clients with EPP plan options. Most EPP plans provide products that replace those containing mercury and PVC plastic, reduce wasteful packaging, and support increased recycled content and "recyclability." Over the years, CHA and many of its members have worked closely with Consorta, which operates in more than half of all Catholic hospitals, to become an industry leader in providing environmentally responsible product lines.

In the past decade, the Catholic Church has become a prophetic voice for environmental stewardship. This has grown out of the church's longstanding commitment to protect the sanctity of life, especially the lives of the most vulnerable. In his 1989 address, "And God Saw That It Was Good," Pope John Paul II said, "Faced with the

widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. . . . *The ecological crisis is a moral issue.*"

Committed Catholics and health care professionals have a moral responsibility to do everything possible to minimize wastefulness and pollution. Significant strides have been made, and the Catholic health ministry is poised to be a leader in today's health care environmental transformation. □

NOTES

1. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), *Mercury Report to Congress*, 1997; EPA National Center for Environmental Assessment, *Inventory of Sources of Dioxin in the United States*, 1998.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Blood and Hair Mercury Levels in Young Children and Women of Childbearing Age—United States," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, vol. 50, no. 8, 1999, p. 140.
3. Ted Schletter, et al., *Generations at Risk: Reproductive Health and the Environment*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999, p. 53.
4. Health Care Without Harm, *Going Green: A Resource for Pollution Prevention for Health Care*, 2001.
5. "Catholic Health Care Providers' Environmental Practices Reflect Mission," *Catholic Health World*, April 15, 2003, 2003, pp. 4-6. Other examples cited here of environment-protection practices at Catholic health care facilities are also taken from that article.
6. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Background Information on Mercury Sources and Regulations*, available at www.epa.gov/grtlakes/bnsdocs/merc-srce/merc_srce.html (Table 2B).
7. Pope John Paul II, "And God Saw That It Was Good," (1990 World Day of Peace message, delivered December 8, 1989), *The Pope Speaks*, May-June 1990, pp. 200, 206.

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