CIIR Faith Reflection

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Living lightly on the earth

Christian stewardship of the environment

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Introduction

Our modern industrialised society is destroying our water, air, sunlight and soils and causing the extinction of a vast number of creatures which God has placed on this earth with us. The scale of the destruction is enormous. Every part of the globe and every ecosystem on earth is now affected, in some situations in an irreversible way. Millions more people around the world may in future, due to global warming, be exposed to the risk of hunger, drought, flooding and debilitating diseases such as malaria.

The human and, therefore, moral and religious challenge of our times is to halt this destruction and heal, where possible, the damage which has already been inflicted on the planet. The churches, however, have been slow to respond. They may have felt, like the preacher in the book of Ecclesiastes, that 'a generation goes, a generation comes, yet the earth stands firm for ever' (Ec. 1:4). In common with the educational, industrial, and financial establishments, the churches have refused to see what is happening to the delicate fabric of life on earth. They have been lulled into a false sense of security by some of the successes of modern technology and have failed to understand the urgency with which the despoilment of creation must be faced. Unless this awareness is gained quickly, then human beings and the rest of the planet's community will be condemned to live amid the ruins of the natural world.

Recent Catholic teaching

The Second Vatican Council, popularly called Vatican II (1962-65), was undoubtedly the major achievement of the Catholic church in the 20th century. The council reconnected the church to its origins in scripture, helped it find a new identity in itself and face the modern world with confidence and a message of hope. *Gaudium et spes* (the church in the modern world), a milestone document of the council, embodies a positive, liberating vision of life which refuses to seal off the religious world from the rest of human affairs.

However, despite its achievement in helping bring the Catholic church into the modern world, Vatican II did not have its ear tuned to an ecological vision of reality. It did not pick up the growing apprehension which many people shared even then about the future of the biosphere. Instead, *Gaudium et spes* subscribes to what is called 'dominion theology'. In this perspective the natural world is

perceived as being there for human beings' exclusive use. This anthropocentric bias – that 'all things on earth should be related to man as their centre and crown' (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 12) – stands in contrast to the beliefs of the great religions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism, and to the cultures of tribal peoples. One famous passage, from a letter attributed to Chief Seattle of the Divamish Indians in response to the US government's request to buy his tribe's land, sums up this contrasting approach:

> If all the beasts were gone, we would die from a great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts happens also to us. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.

It was only in 1988, with the encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, that the environment at last entered into mainstream Catholic social teaching. Then, on 1 January 1990, Pope John Paul II issued *Peace with God the creator, peace with all creation*, the first document from the papal magisterium devoted exclusively to environmental issues. Depending heavily on the *Justice, peace and integrity of creation* programme which the World Council of Churches launched in 1983, it drew attention to the moral and religious dimensions of people's relationship with the environment.

A theology of creation

What contribution can religious institutions like the churches make in response to the present ecological crisis? First of all they can remind people, in season and out of season, about the magnitude of the crisis. Secondly, they can be a prophetic voice and challenge many of the institutions which are impoverishing people and polluting the earth. Finally, they can set about framing a more adequate theology of creation.

An adequate theology of creation will draw heavily on the Bible. Genesis chapter 1 affirms that the world was created by a personal God who saw 'that it was good' (Gen. 1:18). This is an important statement since many cultures in the ancient Near East believed that, because the earth was subject to decay, it must have been created, at least in part, by an evil spirit. This belief still lingers on even in the minds of people who profess to be Christian. It is one of the reasons

why people who ostensibly are Christians can lay waste the forest through destructive logging without having the slightest twinge of conscience.

Some people claim that the command to 'increase and multiply and fill [conquer/dominate] the earth' (Gen. 1:26-28) gives humans a licence to do what they like. Yet contemporary theologians and scripture scholars largely dispute this interpretation of the Genesis text. They believe that the command is a challenge to humans to imitate God's loving kindness and faithfulness in relationship with the non-human components of the earth community.

The call to stewardship

The second account of creation (Gen. 2:4–3:24) is much older and much more earthy than the account in Genesis chapter 1. Humans are created by Yahweh from the earth: 'Yahweh God fashioned man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a living being' (Gen. 2:7). In this account Yahweh's involvement with humans does not end with the act of creation. God planted a garden for humans and 'took man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15). The Hebrew words used here are *abad* and *shamar*. *Abad* means to work or till but it also has overtones of service, while *shamar* means 'keep' with overtones of preserving and defending from harm.

Gen. 2:15 is one text which is often used to promote the notion of stewardship as one of the most appropriate Judaeo-Christian concepts for addressing the environmental question. It challenges humans to use wisely and sparingly the good things that God has created. The final paragraph of Wendell Berry's *The gift of good land* (North Point Press, San Francisco, 1981, p281) captures this point beautifully:

> To live we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully and reverently it is a sacrament. When we do it ignorantly, greedily and destructively it is a desecration. In such a desecration we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness and others to want.

This understanding of stewardship underlies many commendable practices which are found in biblical law, like Sabbath rest for

humans, the animals and the land (Ex. 23:10-12; Lev. 25:4-7), respect for breeding stock (Dt. 22:6-7) and the prohibition on destroying fruit trees (Dt. 20:19). Modern agriculture and production methods would do well to imitate this wisdom.

The Noah story (Gen. 6:11–9:17) has a profound message for our modern world, living as we are through a period of extensive extinction of species. Yahweh commanded Noah to conserve biodiversity – 'From all living creatures, from all living things, you must take two of every kind aboard into the ark, to save their lives with yours; they must be male and female' (Gen. 6:19). After the Flood, Yahweh entered into a covenant not just with human beings but with future generations and all creation: a covenant 'between myself and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come' (Gen. 9:12).

The Bible's wisdom literature, especially the Book of Job, also has what we would now consider a biocentric focus. Humans are not the only creatures on the divine agenda. In Job chapters 38-39, Yahweh asserts that God's creation is meant to serve other creatures also. Other creatures have their legitimate needs and Yahweh as the creator and sustainer of all has provided them with their unique habitat:

> Who has cleft a channel for the torrents of rain,
> and a way for the thunderbolt,
> to bring rain on a land where no man is,
> on the desert in which there is no man;
> to satisfy the waste and desolate land,
> and to make the ground put forth grass? (Job 38: 25-27) (RSV)

> Who has let the wild ass go free?
> who has loosed the bonds of the swift ass,
> to whom I have given the steppe for his home,
> and the salt for his dwelling place? (Job 39: 5-6).

Gustavo Gutiérrez, the Peruvian liberation theologian, comments on the Job texts (*On Job: God talk and the suffering of the innocent*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines, 1986, p74):

> God's speeches are a forceful rejection of a purely anthropocentric view of creation. Not everything that exists was made directly

useful to human beings; therefore they may not judge everything from their point of view. The world of nature expresses the freedom and delight of God in creation.

Job's journey helped to transform him from a self-centred person to one who was sensitive to others, especially the oppressed. He also developed a deeper appreciation of how God relates in an ongoing way to all creation. Christians today must traverse this same journey. It will involve breaking out of the narrow anthropocentric cul-de-sac on which much of our economic, educational, social, political, technological and even religious activities are based.

Living lightly on the earth

A Christian theology of creation has much to learn from the attitude Jesus displayed towards the natural world. He enjoyed an intimacy with nature which is evident from his parables – the sower and the seed (Mt. 13:4-9, 18-23), the vine and the branches (Jn. 15:1-17, Mk. 12:1-12). He illustrated his stories by referring to the natural world – the lilies of the field (Lk. 12:27), the birds of the air (Mt. 6:26) and foxes and their lairs (Lk. 9:58). In this age of unbridled consumerism it is important to remember that Jesus lived lightly on the earth. He warned his disciples against hoarding possessions and allowing their hearts to be enticed by the lure of wealth (Mt. 6:19-21). There is no support in the teachings of Jesus for the modern, throw-away, earth-destroying consumer society.

While the attitude and behaviour of Jesus is very important for his followers, it is a distortion of his teachings to attempt to dig out from the New Testament answers to problems like industrialisation, toxic waste, acid rain, chemical agriculture, forest destruction or rapid population growth which either did not exist during the lifetime of Jesus or were not seen as crucial for the survival of the earth and the human community. It would also be a disservice to the living word of God to allow ourselves to be paralysed or hemmed in by the literal interpretation of individual gospel texts. The challenge for the Christian is to be 'rooted and grounded in Him' (Col. 2:6) 'who came to bring life and give it to the full' (Jn. 10:10) and thus to respond in a creative way to the challenges facing us today.

It is important to remember that the centrality of Jesus is not confined to reflecting on his short life on earth in Palestine.

Christians often make the mistake of thinking that the resurrection somehow catapults Jesus out of the order of creation. The New Testament is adamant that the Risen Christ is even more deeply centred on all creation. The preface for the Mass of Easter Day rejoices in the fact that the resurrection 'renews all creation'. Every living creature on earth has a profound relationship with the resurrected Lord. His loving touch heals our brokenness and fulfills all creation. So, to wantonly destroy any aspect of creation or to banish forever species from their place in the community of life is to deface the image of Christ which is radiated throughout our world.

Renewing the earth

One important Christian notion captures the urgency of the task which faces us. There are a number of words in Greek for time. *Chronos* captures the notion of counting time in some orderly way: from it the word chronology has entered the English language. The New Testament, however, prefers to use the word *kairos*. *Kairos* denotes a special moment which, in fact, is a time of crisis. The antipathy between the forces of good and evil have reached a climax and people are challenged to make a choice. The ultimate resolution of the conflict is assured since Yahweh is in charge of the world, but the challenges presented demand the active involvement of believers. For many individuals and groups this will mean a conversion experience. The ecological crisis is such a *kairos* moment.

This need for an 'ecological conversion' was very much in the mind of Pope John Paul II in a speech made in 2001 ('God made man the steward of creation', Osservatore Romano, 24 January 2001):

> ... in our time, man[1] has unhesitatingly devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted the waters, deformed the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, upset the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, blighted green spaces, implemented uncontrolled forms of industrialisation, humiliating ... the earth, the flower-bed that is our dwelling.
>
> It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain the 'ecological conversion', which over these last decades has made humanity

[1] The quotation uses non-inclusive language.

> more sensitive when facing the catastrophe towards which it was moving. Man is no longer 'minister' of the Creator. However, as an autonomous despot, he is beginning to understand that he must finally stop before the abyss.

On the eve of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in August 2002, Pope John Paul II issued a statement calling for 'an ecological vocation, which in our time has become more urgent than ever'. He said: 'in a world that is increasingly interdependent, peace, justice and the protection of creation must be the fruit of the common effort of all in pursuing the common good together.' It is clear that the church, and Christians everywhere, should be to the fore in trying to usher in this new, ecological age.

Environmental action

This faith reflection is part of a series of CIIR publications on the environment. These publications include the CIIR Comment *People and the environment on the edge: Environmental vulnerability in Latin America and the Caribbean*. The publications are part of CIIR's environmental advocacy project that seeks to raise awareness and understanding of the connections between the environment and development. For more information visit the CIIR website www.ciir.org or contact environment@ciir.org.

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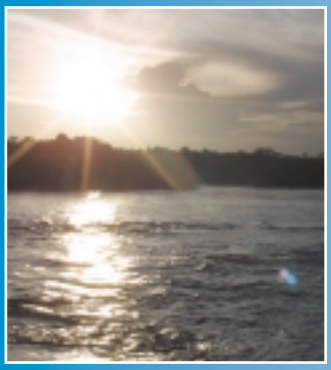

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About the author
Fr Sean McDonagh SSC is an Irish Columban missionary priest who worked on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines for more than 20 years. He witnessed first hand the devastation which tropical deforestation wreaks on people and their environment. His books include *To care for the earth*, *Dying for water* and *Patenting life? Stop!*

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