

## **Our relationship with the environment**

Dr David Hallam, Climate Change Co-ordinator for the World Council of Churches, said in 1996: *“Church people all over the world in rich and poor societies have taken notice of the spiritual importance of environmental problems. Not only must we deal with the effect of industrial society on the quality of the air and water essential to life, but many religious people have recognized the “meaningless of their consumer society” and have a longing to reestablish a connection to the earth. Many non-Western societies have retained a strong sense of the natural world as sacred and the unity of humanity with nature.”*

This reflection on our understanding of the relationship between the human species and the rest of creation has led to a revolution in theological thinking in the past twenty-five years. Theologians had been surprised when Judaeo-Christian theology was accused of having a big part in the ecological crisis facing the world today because of its emphasis on humanity being on earth to dominate creation. The prevailing theology and perhaps the belief that we humans could do whatever we liked to our planet, has been greatly influenced by a quotation from Genesis. *“And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”* (Genesis: 1:28)

This text of Genesis reflects the experience of an ancient people trying to make a living under difficult conditions. Urban people today mostly cannot appreciate the context and therefore how appropriate the language that was used. The words *“subdue”* and *“have dominion”* have been problematic. The Hebrew word translated into English as *“subdue”* suggests English equivalents such as conquer, subjugate, violate, bring into bondage, force and the Hebrew term translated as *“have dominion over”* has equivalents such as tread down, prevail against, and reign over. Such a verse does not say what we as environmentally concerned people today wish it did.

However, in its original context, it had a quite positive meaning. Israel faced a natural world that was mysterious, powerful, and threatening. Within that setting, the text was liberating. It sees nature as good, as part of a God directed world not to be feared, but to be engaged and used for human purposes. People who have cleared and prepared new ground for a garden or farming or have plowed rocky ground, would know that ‘subdue’ is the proper word.

Both the Old and New Testament teach that God is good and has made a good world. In the first chapter of Genesis after every stage in creation, we are told that God looked at what had been made and saw that it was good. The heavens and the earth and the sea, the plants, and the animals are all good. All of this is said before humanity comes on the scene. The world before and without people is good in and of itself and is seen to be good in God's eyes.

Another significant theme of Genesis, is the fall of creation. The original goodness of creation is seen to have been corrupted by the sinfulness of humanity (Adam and Eve). Perhaps today we should abandon that symbol because we know that a perfect paradise never existed in any literal sense.

The theory of cosmic and biological evolution teaches us that the universe emerged from a "big bang" 13.7 billion years ago and expanded and developed into the present world. Death has always been a part of that expansion and development. Earth formed from a star that died! Some would suggest that our original sin is not that we fell from some primordial perfection (in Eden) but that we are still developing; we have not yet achieved what God is inviting us to become. We have failed to rise to the heights of which we are capable and for which God 'dreams'. We have failed to actualise the potential provided for goodness, justice, and love. We have achieved much good, but rather than reduce evil 'we' have introduced massive evils and deep suffering into history and have spoiled our natural environment by ruthless and reckless exploitation in quest of wealth, power, and glory. One hundred million people died in wars in the last century.

*How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?* These are the opening words of Chief Seattle's address in 1854, spoken in a situation similar to the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi fourteen years earlier. Seattle spoke concerning the concession of native lands to white settlers. In his speech he highlighted the close connection his people had with nature. This is a connection our culture has never understood and is challenged to appreciate now as we face ecological crisis and climate change.

*Chief Seattle explained, "Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man. The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember, and teach your children, that the rivers are our brothers and yours, and you must henceforth give the rivers the kindness you would give any brother. The air is precious to the red man for all things share the same breath, the beast, the tree, the man, they all share the same breath. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. You must remember that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports.*

*We know that the white man does not understand our ways. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's grave behind, and he does not care. I am a savage and do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and do not understand how the steam train can be made more important than the buffalo that we kill, only to stay alive.*

*We may be brothers after all. We shall see. One thing we know which the white man may one day discover is that our God is the same God. The earth is precious to Him, and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator. Contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.*

St. Francis of Assisi died in 1226. He is renowned for his deep appreciation of God's presence in all creation and much of his appreciation resonates with that of

Chief Seattle. Francis said, *"If you have people who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have men who deal likewise with their fellow men."*

Like Chief Seattle, Francis saw the interconnection between the human and animal world. *"These creatures minister to our needs every day; without them we could not live and through them the human race greatly offends the Creator every time we fail to appreciate so great a blessing."*

Because Francis saw that everything comes from the same source, he called all created things, no matter how insignificant, his brothers and sisters. This is well highlighted in his famous 'Canticle of the Sun'..

*Be praised, my Lord, through all your creatures, especially through my lord Brother Sun, who brings the day; and you give light through him. And he is beautiful and radiant in all his splendor!*

Francis continues in this Canticle to refer to other 'brothers and sisters'. *Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon, Brothers Wind and Air, Sister Water; Brother Fire, Mother Earth, Sister Bodily Death.* Francis saw God's providential love expressed in and through all creatures: the beauty of a forest, the simplicity of a solitary leaf, the wondrous complexity of a human hand. All of them shouted to Francis that "God is here". For Francis, the world around him drew him to God and was a display of divine love.

Francis understood that the root causes of environmental destruction are found in attitudes of avarice, ignorance and pride. He knew that much of human misery came about because of these same sins. The wealth of the developed world is built on the poverty of the undeveloped world. The evils of globalisation are due to greed. Multinationals 'buy-off' the resources they need to expand. Pride and arrogance go hand in hand, and this is a challenge to any of us who destroy the environment or its creatures carelessly or ruthlessly for our own convenience, comfort or pleasure.

Francis, the medieval mystic, had the innate sense that he intimately connected with every other being, especially his fellow human being. He crossed the borders that separated rich from poor, Muslim from Christian Crusader, men from women and the outcast from the insiders. Francis was deeply in communion with his own environment which led him to the firm belief in the oneness of God: that only in and through God is the whole of creation united and connected.

Catholic theology has only recently come to highlight the values Francis promoted. In 1990, Pope John Paul II called Catholics to ecological conversion. *When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order ... Certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character. First among these is the indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology. ... This has led to the painful realization that we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations ... No peaceful society can afford to neglect either respect for life or the fact that there is an integrity*

*to creation.”*

At a spiritual and theological level, the positive role of earth itself in the story of Christian salvation must be reclaimed. Within the Christian tradition the outpouring of God's love in creation is inseparably linked to its culmination in the saving work of Jesus; the earth is good, revealing of God and integral to Christian prayer. An almost exclusive Gospel focus on the human, and fundamentalist Scripture notions that condemn nature to human's indiscriminate use, must be corrected.

Both St Paul and St James declared that 'faith without good works is dead'. So action on climate change is a moral imperative, a human rights issue, a development issue, a peace and security issue, an economic issue, a survival issue. We are running out of time to remedy the situation. Each of us has a part to play in addressing what is possibly the greatest crisis our world has yet faced.

Climate change is principally a result of the burning of fossil fuels like coal and oil that give off gases such as carbon dioxide. These gases act as a barrier in the atmosphere, trapping the heat of the sun - hence the term 'greenhouse gas'. Rich countries produce around 25 times more carbon dioxide per head of population than poor nations. Through time, humankind has also destroyed tracts of rainforest, mainly in developing countries, that otherwise act as a 'carbon sink', absorbing greenhouse gases. As a result of the trapped gases, the atmosphere warms; seas expand and sea levels rise, causing ocean currents to alter. This in turn changes entire weather systems.

A change in rainfall pattern can mean that farmers' crops fail to mature and communities go hungry. Increasingly severe floods and storms are devastating families' homes and livelihoods year after year. Poor communities who are already struggling with the burden of poverty have to cope with more and more frequent extreme weather events. Victims of extreme weather or natural disasters like earthquakes and tsunamis, experience severe shock and disbelief. They suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) anxiety and depression. Women generally have less access to healthcare in such disasters. We can imagine the fear that asks and lives with the question, "When the earth shakes under your feet what certainty is left?"

As a result of climate change, rainfall levels in many parts of the developing world are falling. This creates a 'domino effect'; with less rain, water levels drop in reservoirs or rivers and people have less water to use. The quality of that water deteriorates as sewage and industrial effluent becomes more concentrated; as a result waterborne disease are rife. With a lack of water, vegetation doesn't grow so livestock have less to graze on. There is also less wood for cooking, so women have to spend more time searching for fuel to cook for the family. An equally serious consequence to less rainfall is less predictable rain.

Our shared crisis can be the trigger for a radical change of lifestyle. We need to start thinking of the world as one country. We all live in Earthland. We must look beyond science and economics. People and everything that sustains life matter. It is morally untenable to decide in terms of the cost to 'my' country or 'my'

economy, without considering the damage I might be doing to the rest of the world. In the same way we cannot simply say that the issues are too big for individuals to make a difference. **We have to think globally and act locally.** United Nations authorities suggest that if we lower emissions immediately, it will take one hundred years to keep the increase of temperature at less than 2°C. The Kyoto Protocol offered emission reduction of 5%. The G8, in its 2007 meeting, offered 50% reduction in emissions. But to ensure our future there has to be 95% reduction. To achieve that, an ecological conversion is needed. *“Humanity has disappointed divine expectations - humiliating the earth, our home. It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain ecological conversion.”* (John Paul II, 2001)

For those of us who are used to unlimited access to fresh water, it is sobering to learn that one billion people in the world today do not have access to clean drinking water and a further 2.6 billion are without basic sanitation. In many countries the upper and middle classes are connected to the water mains, but the poor have to leave their homes to get water. If the poor want clean water, they usually have to buy it, and they pay more for it than those who have running water. The poorer you are the more you pay for water!

Within our own culture we can conserve and recycle water for maximum benefit. Water used for urban consumption can be cleaned after use and reused for irrigation or on gardens. We can avoid water wastage and prevent surface water running off, which will help to stabilise the soil. Reincorporation of organic material like compost increases the capacity of the soil to retain water. Acting in this way can be a vivid reminder of our solidarity with those who do not have access to water as we do.

Reducing carbon emissions will assist with water security. The United Nations has challenged us to reduce our personal carbon emissions by 25% in the next two years. They encourage us to think globally, act locally.

There are practical ways we can help reduce emissions.

1. Drive less! Carpool, walk, bike, and/or take public transit.
2. When driving, ensure tyres are properly inflated. Keep the engine tuned and avoid idling.
3. Reduce laundry use: washing two loads a week in warm or cold water instead of hot water, saves around 225 kilograms of carbon dioxide every year.
4. Get political: Refer environmental issues to the local council or member of parliament.
5. Use elbow grease, not appliances. Huge carbon dioxide emissions can be saved each year by line drying clothes instead of using the dryer.

Climate change is causing confusion of the seasons in West Africa which relies on agriculture. Lack of rain in the rainy season and too much rain during the dry season ruins crops. It is the job of girls to collect water. As water becomes scarcer, girls have to walk farther from home and are at a higher risk of rape.

As the world's population increases over the next 50 years, the United Nations suggests that there will be a need to produce as much food as we have produced in the last 10,000 years. The dilemma is that the Earth cannot sustain the damage caused by large scale industrial farming which depends on fossil fuels to power it. The emissions from these fuels play a direct role in climate change. Fossil fuels are finite and are being depleted. Ethanol uses an enormous amount of land to grow food to feed the world. Much of the land being used to grow crops for ethanol has come from clearing forests!

Critics argue organic farming cannot feed the world. Studies suggest it can, but some new policies are needed. All of nature is interconnected and it is important to maintain ecosystems. The small farmer listens to nature; industrial agriculture does not and is destroying the earth, not replenishing it. Natural agriculture tries to change that mentality by creating a partnership between consumers and producers. The steps to encourage this partnership include

- a) buying local
- b) creating our own garden or joining a community garden
- c) forming relationships with those who grow our food
- d) support farmers who grow food in environmentally sound ways
- e) eating food that is in season

The teachings of Dr Kubler-Ross on death and dying can help us face the fact that the pattern of energy use we have become accustomed to is dying as the planet warms. Do we respond like the dying person with denial, anger, blame, bargaining or fear? Or can we commit ourselves to play our part in supporting the creation of new sources of energy and new patterns of use? We might call it '*green development*'. Life may be a little less comfortable, but nothing compared with those who have their homes washed away in heavy floods, or whose crops produce no yield because of severe drought. In our times, rapid climate change is human induced and is much greater than a natural cycle.

Catholic social teaching is concerned with moral behavior in response to all aspects of human life. Rapid human induced climate change is a moral issue because of its effects on humans and on the Earth. The Church has developed ethical criteria to guide our responses:

- a) the right of all people to a safe environment
- b) just development, economic and social structures
- c) equitable and ecologically sustainable development
- d) the rights of future generations to resources
- e) food security for all nations,
- f) developing countries sharing technology and welcoming environmental refugees
- g) governments promoting the common good.

### **Think globally, act locally.**

In summary, we must be conscious of need to 'care for the earth' and consider the concerns of ecology within the framework of justice and moral responsibility. We are partners in creation. What we do to the environment, we do to ourselves. Columban priest Charles Rue recommends the three 'R's. He suggests as

individuals, communities (and we can add, as Passionist Family Groups),  
**Recycle, Reduce, Remind.**

#### Recycle...

- Revise habits of consumption (e.g. do not buy products with elaborate packaging or dispose of them appropriately).
- Use biodegradable detergents and cleaning products
- Recycle plastics, fruit and vegetable peels, paper and carton, glass and tins.
- Set up compost. Collect an amount of soil, leaves, branches and other garden wastes to help the compost be a natural fertilizer
- Request factories to assume responsibility for collecting used and broken parts of TV's and computers that need a special process in order to be recycled.
- **What more?**

#### Reduce...

- Reducer water consumption.
- Reduce car use (fewer trips, walk, bike etc)
- Reduce the purchase and disposal of non-recyclable materials.
- Avoid using plastic bags where possible
- Reduce the emissions of chlorofluorocarbons and substitutes
- Avoid aerosols
- Avoid electrical appliances (e.g. driers) that use a lot of energy
- Reduce electricity consumption by using fluorescent lights.
- **What else?**

#### Remind...

- Remind local governments of their commitment to recycling and the elimination of wastes, by establishing practices about recycling and elimination of wastes.
- Request packaging of products be simplified
- Be a voice that requests local authorities to save electricity and utilize systems that are electrically efficient.
- Remind governments of their commitment to the declarations and protocols in favour of the environment.
- Remind all those who are in daily relations with you (family, friends, PFG members) of the need to respect the earth and make 'reduce-recycle-reuse-remind' the directive of their pattern of consumption
- **What else?**

**What can your Passionist Family Group do to contribute towards an effective response to climate change issues?**

