

Creation Care

John A. Coleman S.J., Saint Ignatius Church, San Francisco Feb. 12, 2010

Most high, all powerful, all good Lord. All praise is yours, all glory, all honor and all blessing. To you alone, Most High, do they belong. No mortal lips are worthy to pronounce your name. 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! Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars, in the heavens you have made them, precious and beautiful. Be praised, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air, and clouds and storms, and all the weather, through which you give your creatures sustenance. Be praised, my Lord, through Sister Water; she is very useful and humble and precious and pure. Be praised, my Lord through Brother Fire, through whom you brighten the night. He is beautiful and cheerful and powerful and strong. Be praised, my Lord, through our sister, Mother Earth who feeds us and rules us and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.

Long before there was an environmental community or concern, the scriptures, in the psalms and great saints such as Augustine and St. Francis in his stellar canticle to creation we just heard knew that all of creation mirrors God's image and is a primordial gift to us all. Unfortunately, too little preaching ever recalls how much we are stewards of God's creation; how we, made in the image and likeness of God, share with brother sun and sister earth (brother and sister to us because they also mirror the image of God) a common habitat for humanity and the earth.

I am on the board of the California Interfaith Power and Light group which works with parishes, congregations, synagogues and mosques to show a care for God's creation and environmental responsibility. They have declared this weekend a preach-in Sunday for creation care and warning against the environmental degradation we see all around us, even global warming. I do not much like that term, preach in, because it sounds a bit too much political, like a sit in, and misses the depth with which the Hebrew bible and the New Testament bear witness to God's activity in creation. Our first reading today from Job makes that abundantly clear. St. Paul once said, all creation is groaning until it too shares in the resurrection and renewal from Christ.

Our pope, Benedict XVI has on numerous occasions written about creation care and eco-justice. In 2010 in his World Day of Peace statement, " If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation" Benedict reminds us: " Respect for creation is of immense consequence, not least because creation is the beginning and foundation of all God's works. Its preservation has now become essential for the peaceful coexistence of humankind. Man's inhumanity to man has

given rise to numerous threats to peace and to authentic and integral human development, wars, international and regional conflicts, acts of terrorism and violations of human rights. No less troubling are the threats arising from the neglect—if not downright misuse—of the earth and the natural goods God has given us. For this reason, it is imperative that mankind renew and strengthen ‘that covenant between human beings and the environment’, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying”

The pope goes on to remark: “The environment must be seen as God’s gift to all people, and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations. Whenever nature, and human beings in particular, are seen merely as products of chance or determinism, our overall sense of responsibility wanes. On the other hand, seeing creation as God’s gift to humanity helps us understand our vocation and worth as human beings. With the Psalmist, we can exclaim with wonder: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? (Psalm 8:4-5). Contemplating the beauty of creation inspires us to recognize the love of the Creator, that Love which “moves the sun and the other stars.”

But all is not well with God’s creation. The pope goes on to say: We are faced with signs of a growing crisis which it would be irresponsible not to take seriously. “Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities [note he does not refer to these realities as mere theories] as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of ‘environmental refugees, people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it—and often their possessions as well—in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement.? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources. All these are issues with a profound impact on the exercise of human rights, such as the right to life, food, health and development”.

In his statement, the pope urges us to do a profound long-term review of our model of development. He urges intergenerational solidarity (what kind of gift of creation will we pass on to our grandchildren?) He says that technologically advanced societies must be prepared to encourage more sober lifestyles while reducing their energy consumption and improving its efficiency. As he forcefully puts it: “The Wisdom of the ancients had recognized that nature is not at our disposal as ‘a heap of scattered refuse.’ Biblical Revelation makes us see that nature is a gift of the Creator. Everything that exists belongs to God who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. Once again, humans, instead of acting as God’s co-workers, set

themselves up in place of God. They provoke a rebellion on the part of nature ' which is more tyrannized than governed by humanity' We have a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it." This, of course, is now a central part of Catholic Social Teaching. As the pope notes: " The Church has a responsibility toward creation and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone and above all to save humankind from the danger of self-destruction". So all of us need to look at our energy uses, at our life-styles and to begin practices (re-cycling, hybrid autos, better insulated houses, reducing food waste, learning to live more frugally in our energy use) which will make us truly stewards and not destroyers of God's creation. We need to see these not just as good environmental practices but as truly spiritual practices for stewardship.

The Jesuit poet, Gerald Manley Hopkins stands in the long tradition of Christian nature mysticism. As he put it in his poem, God's Grandeur: " The world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil; it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod? Generations have trod, have trod, have trod; and all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil, and wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: The soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod. And for all this, nature is not spent; There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; Because the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods with warm breast and with—ah!—bright wings." We began our prayer today with a prayer that our hearts might be fitting dwelling places for God. But we need also to look at our habitat and make sure it, too, is a fitting dwelling place for God.