

Theologians Visit The Environment

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An amazing number of so-called authorities are making unsubstantiated statements about the degradation of the environment and proposing “cures.” Included among them are religious organizations, teachers, promoters, unions, politicians and corporations. Equally amazing is their agreement that the situation is critical. It takes little effort to determine each has a self interest (e.g. power [even destructive], influence, money, employment, publicity) to perpetuate public belief the situation is deteriorating.

Three publications each professing to be a Catholic perspective on environment (ecology is the word of emphasis) and offering what is reported as theological opinion are:

Renewing the Face of the Earth, (1994) a US Catholic Conference (USCC)1 report largely dominated by the philosophy of the Union of Concerned Scientists, a group of environmental ideologues.

Embracing Earth: Catholic Approaches to Ecology, 2 (1994) a collection of unrelated essays purportedly “responding to the planetary crises.”

“Christian Ecology,” 3 (1996) a quite even handed assessment of differences in the “political ideologies of environmentalism and the Christian tradition of stewardship and respect for the created world” with selected pronouncements of Pope John Paul II.

“Christian Ecology” includes the box *Some Facts and Figures* as basic justification for the crisis the author attributes to “the impact of human technology and lifestyle on our environment.” The difficulty is the *figures* are not *facts*. However, they do set the tone for the reader, who can be expected to pay less than adequate attention to the admonition: “Each of us has a responsibility to decide for himself whether there is a crisis, how serious it is and how we should respond to it. We should try to be aware of the dangers of wishful thinking and ideology.” The selected *facts and figures* promote such crisis ideology. So does the opinion we plunder the planet because we suffer the “Original Sin of industrialization.”

In these three documents the physical aspect of the environment commands attention. Human welfare is of limited concern; restricting use of natural resources and controlling population are the objectives. In effect, improving the dignity of the human and the reality of science required for any expected achievements are not emphasized. One wonders if the authors adequately understand the meaning of ecology. Do they associate ecology with economy, the other essential aspect of environment?

Embracing Earth has many meanings for “ecology”: “this sacred communion, this being-sharing of all the systems of which the cosmos is composed, is what we mean by ecology....” “The cosmos itself is the embodied word of God....eco-spirituality.... creation spirituality (as opposed to “arrogant institutional religion”) all creation is an extension of the neighbor whom we are asked to love as ourselves”... in the “eucharistic vision we have the theological basis for a viable and effective Christian ecology....” “The Ecology is the Theotokos....” “Nature-mysticism is a very precious form of spirituality; eco-spirituality is actually a more contemporary type of nature-mysticism. Nature-mysticism is essentially pantheistic it presupposes a sacramental understanding of the earth, the natural world and the universe...” “Gimmick ecology will save no one.... healing earth must be tied to deep spiritual awakening.”

And there is panic: “It used to take 20,000 years for a single species to go into extinction. Now a species goes into extinction every twenty five minutes” (no examples are given to support this claim).... “larger scale environmental destruction being wreaked on nature in the form of loss of biodiversity, ozone destruction and industrial-scale deforestation....” “over consumption and idolatrous greed ecologically ruinous practices driven by industrial capitalism...”

“Verbal Pollution,” by William McNamara, O.C.D., one chapter in *Embracing Earth*, is exceptional. “The most corrupting influence in the world today and the most tolerated is verbal pollution.” Father McNamara recalls that “In the *Humiliation of the Word* French theologian Jacques Ellul goes so far as to distinguish between the truth and reality. This ‘everyday reality’ for which we stand, he calls a lie. “We substitute facile beliefs for a vital faith. We join the wrong movements. Most movements today, some flourishing in the Catholic church, are

spurious. They come and go, their banality inevitably short lived. Their words, clichés, slogans, and disguised idolatries sputter and spit, generating hot air and ashes instead of salutary action. Such power-fired self righteous eruptions are as nugatory as they are trendy and tawdry.”

“By your words you will be justified, and by your words condemned” (Mt 12:37). “This reminds us of the ultimate seriousness of words. Words involve commitment and reflect authenticity. We will answer for every unfounded word.” (Mt 12:36) The book’s summary ignores the emphasis on truth as requisite for effective communication and achievement.

“What is called scientific theology is normally conveyed in a language devoid of a sense of awareness.” Following this Dorothy Soelle quote, Father McNamara continues “(I)t has no interest and no appeal. It has a dull flatness because it leaves no room for doubt.” As one who labored through this volume, I concur with Father McNamara who comments, “Theologians must speak beyond the academy. Any theology that wants to communicate with real people must use a language that shows awareness, brings people and their problems into the dialogue and is forceful.” He recalls Evagrius of Pontus: “The theologian is one whose prayer is true.” Theologians must become better acquainted with science if their pronouncements are to reflect science and be true.

Theologians are apparently discovering the “environment” as a new field of endeavor. Whether the “environment staff” of the US Catholic Conference (USCC) is theologically qualified is a question I pose to the reader. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), it seems, allowed the staff autonomy, thus trivializing the teaching role of the hierarchy.

The three documents being reviewed have deficiencies in common:

1. No recognition of nor recommendation for improving the dignity of the human as an essential component in the environmental equation. The essential role of wealth in achieving the dignity of the person is neither defined, nor recognized. In fact, personal wealth is impugned as the primary cause of the degradation of the world.
2. No recognition that improving the environment requires engineering, scientific and economic competence and involvement. It promotes the idea that a return to sustenance, communal living is a corrective measure. Not recognized is that improvement in the natural environment, improved food production and improved quality of life for humans occur only where there is capitalism and the use of synthetic chemicals. In the USA forests have increased by 140 million acres of forests since 1920 with accompanying increases in bird and animal life, and a decrease in soil erosion. They do not recognize that Third World nations destroy forests only because they lack alternative fuel sources.
3. An apparent presumption that religious platitudes and biblical quotations are adequate substitutes for economics, that social justice (renamed “eco-justice” by the USCC) in the form of government grants and punitive and restrictive regulations constitute sound economics and adequate guidance.
4. “Destruction of the planet,” “rape of the land,” “gross pollution of air, water, land” is a standard description used by several of the authors unsupported by a single factual reference.

Unhappily Father McNamara is guilty of this breach too, even after presenting an excellent case for requiring truth “in a world of acceptable lies” where “we as witnesses of pure veracity, become martyrs.” Had theologians and philosophers been as concerned about the environment (ecology) 35 to 50 years ago, they could have viewed real “gross pollution.” At that time the first efforts to “clean up the nest” were made. The extent of recovery has been remarkable, but these authors are not aware of this. Nor do they appreciate that many of today’s political and emotional remedies do little to improve nature but much to prevent improved human environment, particularly in Third World countries. They are woefully ignorant of the inexhaustible reserve of minerals in the earth’s crust; they frequently describe it as being rapidly depleted. Availability depends only on energy and technology, which have already proved most effective in increasing supply as the market dictated.

The words of Richard Rohr, OFM, an author in *Embracing Earth*, are applicable: “People with all kinds of certitudes, but no wisdom, all kinds of supposed clarity, but no real understanding.” Politics, not science, is their base. Undoubtedly these people are sincere. Their remedy, however, depends solely on a hoped-for rapid change in the way of life of all. The total consequences of their proposed changes on either nature or people, particularly on the poor, are not considered. Recall the Peanuts character Charlie Brown’s question: “Why can’t I win when I am so sincere?” Should not development of the individual’s dignity, which means development of capability, be an essential? How is it done without energy or wealth? Does reliance on the dole save the “ecology”?

Since these publications profess to be “Catholic guidance” in achieving an enhanced environment, it may be instructive to recall views of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen on “world ecology.” Archbishop Sheen, in an undated taped introduction to a retreat to a group of bishops,⁴ provided historical background on that question. The Archbishop noted that Catholic church history can roughly be divided into four 500 year periods. The first was concerned with the historical Christ and the Christological heresies; the second with the head of the Church, the Pope, witnessed the Muslim invasion and the eastern schism; the third 500 years dealt with the Church and the Reformation. In the current 500 years the great concern is the world around us. Archbishop Sheen noted that great tensions now affecting the Church deal with the world. He called it an “ecological crisis.”

“What is to be our attitude toward the world?” Archbishop Sheen asked the bishops. As noted at Vatican II, the Scriptures provide two quite different meanings for “world.” The distinction is important. “The first is a theater of redemption: ‘God so loved the world...’ The second: ‘I pray not for the world. I have taken you out of the world, therefore the world will hate you. If I left you in the world, the world would love you. The world loves its own.’ The world in this latter sense is a spirit, a spirit of godlessness, an organization without God.”

Many individuals in the church particularly in the United States “...began to develop a certain worldliness.” ‘You have got to be with it!’ was the announced purpose. Still, as the Archbishop noted, “no one ever defined *it*. But the penalty was terrible for not being with *it*!

“At a time when the Church was weak the time of the Reformation the crucifixion faded out. Now, four centuries later, the effect is accentuated. The crucifixion and resurrection are not the central message from the pulpit. Politics, economics and sociology have taken over.” Archbishop Sheen emphasized the consequence. “We have a Cross without Christ, a Christless Cross, in totalitarian countries; we have a Christ without a Cross, a Crossless Christ, in modern western civilization.”

The Archbishop lamented the divorce of Christ and Cross.⁵ Christ without the Cross “...is pointed to as a teacher of humanitarian ethics, the one who blesses big gifts and inspires pious platitudes. But Christ without the Cross is an effeminate ‘do-gooder’ who speaks only of soft things, can offer no hope to the suffering and never picks up whips to drive buyers and sellers out of the temple.”

“The Cross stands for sacrifice, dedication, enthusiasm, fire. Into this group of those who take up the Cross without Christ would fall those who have ‘zeal without knowledge’ who feel they have a mission, spend themselves and are spent for it.”

Apparently, the US Bishops have not recognized that their competency in assessing world problems may be limited when their total involvement is in politics, economics and sociology; there are other aspects requiring assessment for effective solutions of “ecological, world” issues. Without that knowledge the American Bishops have been seriously duped. Biblical quotations to justify positions are not adequate substitutions. They may show responsibility but they do not provide guidance on the assessment of issues.

The USCC was sold a bill of goods by the Union of Concerned Scientists, that promoting the theme of “eco-justice,” so-called “social justice” will solve the environmental crises touted as jeopardizing the world. What does “eco-justice” mean? The material in their publications seems to conclude that problems are solved by legislation, regulation and federal subsidy for Church social programs. Without the ability to assess the sales

pitch, they were deceived. Without specific objectives oriented toward answering needs of people and nature, there can be no achievement. (This situation is developed in detail in *Saviors of the Earth?* by Coffman, Northfield Publishing, 1994; in the ITEST Workshop *Christianity and the Environmental Ethos*, St. Louis, March 1996 and *Conservative Environmentalism* by Dunn and Kinney, Quorum Books, 1996.)

Pope John Paul II (July 3, 1981) requested the Pontifical Academy of Sciences to lay to rest the mistrust from the debate between theologians and Galileo on whether the earth or the sun is the center of the world. It is ironic that a mirror image of that difference between science and theology is now in the making about “ecology.” The Pope in his summary of lessons from the Galileo review⁶ included these prophetic and pertinent thoughts.

1. “The underlying problems of this case concern both the nature of science and the message of faith. It is therefore not to be excluded that one day we shall find ourselves in a similar situation, one which will require both sides to have an informed awareness of the field and of the limits of their own competencies.”
2. “A further work of interpretation is needed. This is precisely the object of philosophy, which is the study of the global meaning of the data of experience and therefore also of the phenomena gathered and analyzed by the sciences.”
3. “It is a duty of theologians to keep themselves regularly informed of scientific advances in order to examine, if such be necessary, whether or not there are reasons for taking them into account in their reflection or for introducing changes in their teaching.”
4. “The Church has the duty to be attentive to the pastoral consequences of her teaching. Before all else, let it be clear that this teaching must correspond to the truth.”
5. “What is important in a scientific or philosophic theory is above all that it should be true or at least seriously and solidly grounded.”

The Pope emphasized the essentiality of truth, recognition of limitation of competency, the duty of theologians to be regularly informed of scientific advances, the duty of the Church to heed consequences of her teaching, and the continuing assessment of the global meaning of the data of experience.

Unless there is competent technical involvement to answer the question “Is it true?” about ecological crises, the Bishops will not be aware that they are being used to promote needless fear, to encourage wasting money and committing the poor, particularly those in Third World nations, to perpetual poverty. There has been no evidence of such technical involvement to date by independent authorities.

Answers are needed to the question “Is it true?” about a number of “ecological crises” defined by environmental ideologues and promoted by church and synagogue distribution of material on eco-scaries. These “crises” have a single purpose to excite fear and thus condition the public to accept controls on population and on natural resource development. Population is a most important resource for many Third World nations. Natural resource development, including energy, is essential to the production of wealth required for improving the way of life in those nations. The devastating consequences to the world’s poor must be understood by the Bishops. So, too, the definition of an effective program to improve both human and natural environments, particularly in Third World nations!

The program promoted by the USCC does not follow the Pope’s guidelines. An independent American Commission should be appointed to appraise the situation, providing the Bishops with a basis for assessing the global consequences to the poor. A Vatican-appointed Commission might view the world consequences more effectively.

American Bishops should recognize a responsibility to the poor of the world that goes beyond an annual collection. This responsibility includes questioning the premises and consequences of limiting international

development, and America's role in the agencies involved. The American Bishops could form an alliance with the Third World Bishops to familiarize themselves with the environmental conditions and potential remedies in those countries. They could learn about some of the inappropriate demands being placed on those countries seeking US aid. Their joint voice could have tremendous impact. It is a wasted opportunity not to do this while there is a Pope who can see world needs in perspective and who is loved by the people of the world. Such action would be a major extension of the US Bishops' policy statement Political Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good. Does that statement

This last suggestion is of particular importance now that the UN "Global Governance" proposal is being positioned for adoption. Under that protocol all land and natural resources would belong to the state and their use decided by UN appointed councils. This would include resources of the USA. The US has already given control to the UN of much western park land. Under such an arrangement developed nations will decline; Third World nations will never develop. The representatives of Third World nations to the UN are blinded by promises of wealth from developed nations in exchange for agreeing to UN-proposed policies. But they are not answering their people's needs.

"Africa in Flames" --- *The Catholic World Report* (April 1997) --- addresses this situation. The poor are pressured by political corruption in Sub-Saharan countries including destruction of property and loss of life to support the ruling parties' excesses. These rulers are indirectly encouraged to prevent democratic representative government by international financial programs which provide benefits to the 10 percent empowered elite. The 90 percent, mostly rural poor, have little or nothing to say about their way of life. Moreover, financial controls prevent development of the resources and energy that would provide income and means for encouragement of individual initiatives.

Lack of development of these resources is encouraged by western propaganda ascribing global warming to the production of carbon dioxide, a by-product of such development. The claim is that CO₂ must be prevented in Third World countries (only reduced in developed countries) to save the world from disaster. But is that complaint true?

Qualified scientists with sound data deny this conclusion. Global satellite data, supported by ground observations, actually show a cooling trend. Competent scientists insist the measure of effect is not the tonnage of carbon dioxide produced but what happens to it. Much of it is absorbed in the oceans; much is food for trees and plants and thereby converted to oxygen. (About 1.1 pounds of oxygen is produced for every pound of carbon dioxide used by the plants). Not considered by the political alarmists are the 140 million acres of trees in the US that were *not* here in 1920 but *are* present now.

The major warming period in the past 100 years occurred from 1880 to 1930. Less than one third of the total carbon dioxide increase occurred during that period. Political propaganda does not acknowledge this fact. From the 1940s to the 1970s, while greenhouse gases continued to build up in the atmosphere, observed temperatures decreased considerably, with significant agricultural impact in Northern Europe. "Politicized scientists" ignore the fact that the major "greenhouse" gas is not carbon dioxide but water vapor. Bureaucratic remedies will not occur until the destruction of Third World economies is shown ineffective in limiting global warming. But the objective would be achieved.

To many the real purpose of this political emphasis on global warming, and on speed in establishing restraints on development, is simply to keep the Third World nations subjugated. This can be attained by their inability to develop energy or natural resources. In similar manner the Ozone Hole hoax was crafted to prevent availability of cheap refrigerant (e.g. Freon after patents expired) which would permit storage of food and medicines. Malnutrition and disease are scourges in Third World countries. Competent scientists have exposed the fraud in this "science," ballyhooed by press and politicians disinterested in the welfare of the world's poor.

Africa in flames --- genocide actual and incipient --- can not be blamed simply on tribal differences. The people need the means to develop human dignity. This is of critical importance to developing nations and to people

seeking the means to improve quality of life. The American Bishops could, in justice, convene a forum to explore the consequences of alternative decisions affecting human dignity and development. Such a program would benefit from international leadership support. The voice of the Catholic Church could guide (and should guide) this attempt, if it strongly believes in “social justice.”

Basic knowledge of the truth, and limits of knowledge in ecological scares, is available. However, it requires a better means of communication so the public can appreciate the consequences of programs. Political spin placed on so much of what purports to be “scientific consensus” destroys the integrity of science. Understanding relative risks would allow us to make more informed decisions on the importance of our concerns and promote a more effective use of limited resources. Assessing the value of human life necessarily requires evaluating political, technical, physical and economic constraints preventing its attainment.

Ecology and economics are attributes of environment. Both words derive from the same Greek root for family or household. Simply, ecology deals with the relationships among the members of the household; economics deals with the efficiency of the household in supplying the needs of its members.

Many people, including some clergy, panic over the announcement of possible “cataclysmic” ecological disaster. Without solid evidence, they consider the best approach is to take no chances. That decision automatically affects others in many ways: encouraging restrictions on way of life of people or on use of material; interference with legitimate the income of companies and/or individuals; giving priority to commitment of funds which could be more effectively and productively spent on other needs of greater importance. Two other impacts demand attention. Panic promotes fear and undermines education. For many, opinion or “feeling” can be stronger than fact. Such emotions can reflect a lynch mob rationale.

Theological truth is the hallmark of the Catholic Church. This must be matched with ecological and economic truth if the environment is to be protected and enhanced. People must have the opportunity to attain their inherent dignity. How to achieve that goal is a real challenge for theologians. The guidelines enunciated by the Pope deserve adoption by all who are truly concerned about the “ecology.”

ENDNOTES:

1. Department of Social Development and World Peace, US Catholic Conference (USCC), 3211 Fourth St. N.E. Washington, D.C. 20017.
2. La Chance, Albert & John E. Carroll, Editors, New York, Maryknoll; 19 essays plus 3 introductory opinions summarized in considerable length by Sr. Worman Carolyn Sur SSND in the *ITEST Bulletin*, Winter, 1997. The collection displays an almost pathological objection to capitalism, industry and urban living and an obsession with equating natural objects (e.g. stones, trees, crops) with humans in the scheme of creation.
3. Caldecott, Stratford, Center for Faith and Culture, Westminster College, Oxford, in *The Catholic World Report*, August/September, 1996, pp 29 - 36.
4. Sheen, Archbishop Fulton J. “Prayer and Meditation,” St. Joseph Communications, Covina, CA.
5. Sheen, Fulton J. “On Being Human,” Universal Press Syndicate 1982.
6. Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, October 31, 1992, printed in *Dossier*, July-August 1995 pp 35-39.