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Australian Catholic Bishops and the Environment



A New Earth - The Environmental Challenge

The Social Justice Sunday Statement for 2002 was prepared by the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (ACSJC), the national social justice and human rights agency of the Catholic Church in Australia.

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God's Creation

Christians believe that God created the universe and holds it in existence at every moment. We believe that God delights in all the creatures of the Earth (Proverbs 8:30-31) and finds the whole of creation good. (Genesis 1:31).

St Bonaventure described the universe as being like a book reflecting, representing, describing its maker; in January this year Pope John Paul II used the same image, commenting that creation " is almost like another sacred book whose letters are represented by the multitude of creatures present in the universe (General Audience Vatican City 30 January 2002). A relationship of kinship exists among all of God's creatures. This is what St Francis of Assisi, patron saint for ecology, celebrated in his life and in his Canticle. He sang of the sun, the moon, the stars, the wind, the water and fire as brothers and sisters, and of our sister, Mother Earth.

Because we are part of God's creation, human beings are connected with all creatures, the natural world, indeed the whole universe. The two accounts in Genesis show that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, and are to be responsible for the care of all creation, a God-given role which, as Christians, we must take seriously.

Human greed, violence and selfishness have a destructive impact, on people and the environment. Wherever sin and its consequences in the world have fractured our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the whole of creation, reconciliation is needed.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Our Lord, bring salvation not only to humankind, but also, in a different way, to the rest of creation. St Paul tells us that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now (Romans 1:22), eagerly awaiting the coming of salvation in Christ. In the Letter to the Colossians we see that not only are all things created in Christ, but that all things are reconciled in him:

"all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things and in him all things hold together, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross." (Colossians 1:15-20).

The Christian Task

In justice, it is an urgent task for Christians today to be reconciled with all creation, and to

undertake faithfully our responsibility of stewardship of God's gifts.

To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God's creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.

God calls us to turn away from wrongdoing and to behave in new ways. As the Bishops Committee for Justice, Development and Peace explained in their 1991 statement, Christians and their duty towards nature:

Catholics believe that the Bible sets out to give religious truth, not exact scientific data. It does not intend to give an approved cosmology or a correct scientific account of the world's origins. We have to look to science for these.

We believe that, however the universe came into being, however the human race began, God is the creator of the universe and of the human race. In this belief we find the origins of our conviction that, as Christians, we have an ethical duty to respect the gifts of creation, to give thanks for them, and to use them in accord with the will of God, as best we can interpret it.

We hope that this statement will encourage the Catholic community in fulfilling these ethical responsibilities.

Our Natural Heritage

"Before this panorama of meadows, woods, streams and mountain peaks that touch the sky, we all discover afresh the desire to thank God for the wonders that He has made and we wish to listen in silence to the voice of nature, so that we can transform our admiration into prayer. For these mountains awake in our hearts the sense of the infinite with the desire to raise up our minds to what is sublime. It is the Author of Beauty Himself who created these wonders." (John Paul II)

Increasing numbers of Australians and others are appreciating the bounty and diversity of our natural heritage. Australia's commitment to the World Heritage Convention has already benefited the crucial work of conservation in this country.

But for it, the pristine wilderness valleys of the lower Gordon and Franklin rivers in Tasmania would have been drowned by damming, and the mystical tropical rainforests near Cairns in North Queensland lost to the world from logging.

In Pope John Paul II's words, 'Our very contact with nature has a deep restorative power; contemplation of its magnificence imparts peace and serenity,' hold a special significance for such areas as:

The tropical rainforests of north-east Queensland which, more than any other forests in the world, are a living link with the vast forests that grew many millions of years ago. This area is blessed with ancient giant trees such as the 3,500-year-old Macintyre Boxwood, living at the time of, and sharing the earth with Jesus himself.

The waters of Shark Bay, Western Australia, which celebrate the habitat of the manta ray, dolphin, shark and endangered dugong. Seagrasses covering over 4,000 square kilometres sustain the world's most abundant growth of bizarre-shaped ancient algal stromatolites, which represent the oldest forms of life on earth.

The Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, the one million hectare forested landscape on a sandstone plateau which is a natural laboratory for studying the evolution of the eucalyptus. The Wollemi pine, a species scientists believed to have been extinct for millions of years, a

living fossil dating back to the dinosaurs, was discovered only recently in a secluded area.

The Kakadu National Park, in the Northern Territory, with its vast wetlands and spectacular escarpments in our tropical north, containing ecosystems that continue to evolve with minimal human disturbance. Aboriginal rock art sites provide an outstanding record of human interaction with the environment over tens of thousands of years.

These natural wonders remind us of the words of St Paul, 'Ever since the creation of the world, God's eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen through the things God has made.' (Romans 1:20).

The World of God's Spirit

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples occupy a unique place in Australian society as the original owners and custodians of these lands and waters. Indigenous peoples' expression of their culture and view of the world, through art, song, dance, story, ceremony and poetry is becoming increasingly accepted in mainstream culture, as illustrated in these words of Maisie Cavanagh:

My Mother's land can be dry and harsh. Yet every tree, every cluster of rocks, mountain, waterhole, river, cave is sacred-every feature. The billabongs and the places where the spirits live are all landscapes of the soul. For we as people see these mountains, rivers, trees, animals, wind, as brothers and sisters, and we are part of the one thing.

Thinking in these terms pitches you into a different psychology. So we take notice of the call of the black crow, or the laugh of the kookaburra, or the change in the wind. We pay attention to the willy-wagtail when he comes to visit, or the magpie who sits on the clothes line even here in the hustle and bustle of city life.

That is why we enjoy our Aboriginal liturgy in the bush, where we can have a fire, walk through the smoke, sit in a circle and have the earth beneath our feet, and feel the sun and the breeze, and see the clouds in the sky as we celebrate our smoking ceremonial liturgies.

Pope John Paul II affirmed the religious and ecological significance of Indigenous Australians' feeling of kinship with the land when he met Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at Alice Springs in 1986:

For thousands of years, this culture of yours was free to grow without interference by people from other places. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves. You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it, and then walk away from it. You realised that your land was related to the source of life.

The silence of the bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with another world, the world of God's Spirit.

The Pope told the gathering that the Church in Australia would not be fully the Church that Jesus intended it to be until the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had made their contribution to its life, and this contribution had been joyfully received.

In the same way, our relationship with the land and all of its people will not be fully healed until the relationship between Indigenous and other Australians is healed.

As long ago as 1990, before the Wik and Mabo decisions, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference included among the requirements for reconciliation a secure land base for dispossessed Aboriginal communities and a just process for the resolution of conflicting

claims to the land and its use, especially between Aborigines, pastoralists and miners. The Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Melbourne puts it this way:

To be denied a place is to be deprived of the roots of our spirituality. Restoration of land is restoration of human dignity.

Groans from the Earth, Cries from the Poor

The early European settlers on this continent encountered an environment that they considered to be hostile. As time passed they learned to respect the land, and 'the bush' evoked a romantic love-fear relationship.

Still, for most Australians 'the bush' remained alien and as the population rapidly expanded, increasing numbers moved to coastal towns and cities, where now some 88 per cent of the population occupy the edges of the continent.

In our own time, the Australian Conservation Foundation, with the National Farmers Federation, issued a visionary document, examining the ecological footprint since European settlement. It concludes:

Of the four major environmental problems facing the globe in the early 21st century-the state of the oceans, loss of biodiversity, land and water degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions-Australia is worst performed of all developed countries on three of the four.

Analysing the causes of this revealing environmental audit, the document continues:

We have undoubtedly received past economic and social benefits from this environmental abuse. The vast wealth from agriculture and mining has come at the loss of native ecosystems and species, and land and water quality. Our vast coal reserves have produced cheap electricity for industry and households, but have been a major cause of greenhouse emissions.

Australian studies are now demonstrating the links between environmental quality and public health. Air pollution from industry, agriculture, construction and road traffic has been linked to increased risk of cardio-respiratory disease, reduced lung function, asthma and respiratory irritation.

The national 2001 State of the Environment Report, conducted by hundreds of our leading scientists, has concluded that, under present conditions, Australia is not environmentally sustainable. This important document warns that urgent action, through political and economic initiatives at federal and state levels, is necessary to protect our land, water and air.

Land

"Praise be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth, Who sustains and governs us, And who produces varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs."

(Francis of Assisi, The Canticle of Brother Sun)

Our country owes a great debt to those who have for decades campaigned to protect our unique woodlands, rangelands and forests, and to the men, women and children who quietly go about preserving our biodiversity and protecting our heritage.

Reports from the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society warn us, however, that:

the threats to unprotected forests have never been greater. The Australian native bush is being cleared at well over one hundred times the rate that it is being replanted. In the year 2000, Australia exported seven million tonnes of woodchip from native forests-the majority from Tasmania. Just 10 per cent of Australia's original old growth forests remain.

As trees and native vegetation are bulldozed, rural Australians, especially, are becoming increasingly aware of loss of biodiversity, species extinction and destructive salination of the soil. Theologian Wendell Berry comments that, 'The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care of it we can have no life'.

Water

"Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, Which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste."

(Francis of Assisi, The Canticle of Brother Sun).

The health of our rivers is a national issue. River stress is a major issue in the Murray-Darling Basin, and for all the southeast coastal river systems of Victoria and New South Wales, the agricultural regions of south and central coastal Queensland, the southwest of Western Australia and northern Tasmania. We can still preserve the great rivers of the continent's far north, which remain mostly pristine, free and wild.

The health of the Murray-Darling Basin epitomises the ecological crisis. This once great waterway now surrenders 80 per cent of its flow for human consumption.

Since European settlement between 12 and 15 billion trees have been lost from the Basin. This river system, which is a major artery of Australia's agriculture, is exhausted and dying. Because of water removal for irrigation, the river at times does not have the strength to reach the sea.

Where the river flows everything will live. Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river - because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.(Ezekiel 47:9-12).

The world's largest living organism, the Great Barrier Reef, is threatened with a slow death due to rising water temperature and toxic sediment run-off from the mainland. This beautiful 2,000 kilometre necklace of multi-coloured coral reef, which nurtures some 1,500 species of fish, and is a breeding area for humpback whales and endangered green and loggerhead turtles, is facing extinction.

In the words of Thomas Berry, 'to wantonly destroy a living species is to silence forever a divine voice'.

Air

"Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind, And through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather, By which you give sustenance to your creatures."

(Francis of Assisi, The Canticle of Brother Sun).

Although the problem of pollution from motor vehicles is being addressed with increasing energy and success, they are still the single biggest source of air pollution in cities. In regions of rapid development such as Perth, western Sydney and south east Queensland, vehicle emissions and traffic congestion remain a significant concern, as tens of thousands of cars

are added to our roads annually.

The Total Environment Centre suggests that the challenge 'is to stop the growth in vehicle kilometres travelled and shift many trips to public transport. This will require an accessible, frequent, safe and affordable system'.

The deadly links between environmental degradation, poverty and human ill health are undeniable. The 2.8 billion people who struggle to survive on less than \$2 per day suffer most from exposure to dirty water, polluted air, poor sanitation and hazardous waste. Every year between five and six million people in developing countries die from water-borne diseases and air pollution.

In Australia, people living in remote Indigenous communities or residential areas close to heavy industry are the most vulnerable to sickness caused by environmental factors and pollution.

Global Warming

Possibly the most disturbing environmental phenomenon of recent times is the threat of global warming.

The majority of environmental scientists agree that the release of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere is threatening to change our climate patterns, raise sea levels and harm life on earth.

As the worst emitters per person of greenhouse gases on the planet, Australians are particularly challenged in justice to reflect on the plight of our Pacific island nation neighbours.

The cry of the seven million inhabitants of these beautiful islands, including Tuvalu, Kiribati, Palau, Tonga, Nauru and the Cook Islands, who fear that their lands will be battered and submerged by rising sea levels and changing weather patterns, requires us to take immediate measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Towards Ecological Conversion

"It is immediately evident that humanity has disappointed divine expectations - humiliating the earth, our home. It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain ecological conversion."

(Pope John Paul II, General Audience, 17 January 2001).

The Church hears the cries of the poor and the groans of the earth. It seeks to stand in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, and to exercise good stewardship of the fragile ecosystems that support life on earth. Every day more Christians are becoming aware of their responsibilities as people of faith towards God's Creation.

This growing awareness is also reflected in the teachings of the Church. Since the late 1980s the Pope has been raising social and environmental issues with increasing frequency and intensity in an important contribution to the development of Catholic Social Teaching in our times. These teachings can help us, as individual Christians, and as part of a Church community, to accept our responsibility to protect people and the planet.

Catholic social teaching reminds us that human beings are called to act as stewards safeguarding the integrity of creation. We need to change our ways of seeing the world, of thinking and behaving, as we accept our responsibility to protect earth's finite natural resources.

According to the principle of the universal destination of goods everyone has a right to access the goods of creation to meet their needs-our lifestyles should not make such large demands on resources that others are left in need. We should practise simplicity, moderation and discipline. In the face of the consumer culture that surrounds us, this is a big challenge for each one of us.

The principles of solidarity and the common good remind us that we are all really responsible for each other and must work for social conditions which ensure that all people and groups in society are able to meet their needs and realise their potential. Every group in society should take into account the rights and aspirations of other groups, and the well being of the whole human family.

Our personal choices-recycling, waste avoidance, composting, tree planting, car-pooling, prudent water and energy use-are important, but to achieve authentic sustainability, our personal actions must be reflected in the way in which economic and political systems are structured. As Christians we are challenged to analyse the social structures that force millions to live in squalor, burdened by crippling debt, while a tiny minority accumulate vast wealth from exploiting earth's resources.

Structural changes will often need an international framework, but our responsibility for one another is not only international, it is also intergenerational-we have a sacred duty to ensure that the world that future generations inherit continues to reflect the glory of God. Our concept of the common good goes beyond any country or generation.

What can we do?

Action is needed on many fronts. The principle of subsidiarity suggests that responsibility for decision-making and action should be kept as close as possible to those most directly affected by a decision or a policy. Individuals, community groups, governments at all levels, businesses and faith communities all have roles to play.

Politicians and public servants can do much to protect and rejuvenate our ecosystems and natural resources. Stronger environmental protection legislation, accelerated research into safe and renewable energy sources, further education in ecological responsibility, programs to address pressing environmental issues such as global warming, land clearing, salination and the sustainable management of natural resources are all needed.

Retraining and new employment opportunities are needed for workers displaced by such changes. When we vote in local, state or federal elections, individuals and community groups can encourage, support and challenge governments by assessing the environmental policies of the different candidates.

Consumers and traders can promote environmentally healthy practices by exercising their right of choice and advising a business of the reason for their decision. Shareholders, too, should use their votes responsibly on corporate resolutions and the election of board members. Those in leadership and managerial roles, from family firms to transnational corporations, are encouraged to demonstrate ethical business practices and good corporate governance.

The Pope makes it very clear that it is: A serious abuse and an offence against human solidarity when industrial enterprises in the richer countries profit from the economic and legislative weaknesses of poorer countries, to locate production plants or accumulate waste which will have a degrading effect on the environment and on people's lives.

Community and conservation groups have already done much to raise our awareness of

environmental issues and to advocate policies to protect the integrity of creation. One outstanding success is the Clean Up Australia movement, launched by Ian Kiernan in 1989 and enthusiastically embraced by more than six million volunteers around the country working to improve their local areas. Over the past twelve years Australians have devoted more than eight million hours to earthcare work and collected over 165,000 tonnes of rubbish. From this movement, with the support of the United Nations, the Clean Up the World campaign has evolved, to the extent that in 2001 almost 38 million people from 124 countries volunteered their time to improve local communities and ecosystems.

Catholic parents, as the primary teachers of their children, can help them discover the wonders of nature. Catholic parishes, schools, dioceses and organisations have an essential role to play. They are challenged to be examples of best practice in ecological stewardship.

Some Encouraging Signs of the Times

In order to address the call for concrete programs and initiatives and to stimulate and sustain ecological conversion more effectively, the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference has established a new national agency, Catholic Earthcare Australia, which will act as an advisory Council on environmental justice issues.

With an interim mandate to link, resource and encourage the many burgeoning ecological Church initiatives around Australia, this Council will also serve the Church nationally in areas of advocacy, research and education.

The Archdiocese of Adelaide's Catholic Earthcare Commission is mandated 'to promote the integrity of creation and to raise awareness of the need for ecological sustainability, in the Church, and the wider community in Adelaide'.

Recently the Sydney Catholic Education Office launched its Earthcare Project, to assess the sustainability of operations of its numerous Church office buildings, and to identify and implement areas of improvement. Hundreds participated in environmental audits of their offices. Staff-devised environmental management systems, with improved efficiency in the use of energy, water and paper, recycling and ethical purchasing are now operating successfully.

Catholic Education Offices run creation-centred spirituality courses and retreats at Feathertop Chalet, Victoria and Tidbinbilla, Canberra.

Encouraging Signs Among the Young

Young people and children, guided by conscientious, environmentally aware teachers, are at the forefront of the developing interest and action for preserving our unique heritage. Some original ideas are found at:

Mater Christi Primary School, Yangebup, a primary school of 660 in the southern suburb. The ecological studies program is being integrated into the school curriculum. Because of its location on the edge of Beeliar Regional Park and Lake Yangebup, the school has taken responsibility, through the WA Environment Protection Authority, for regenerating degraded areas of bush. These plant propagation areas and the school's Environment Centre have become the focus of a range of ecology education activities.

Activities for 2002 include further tree and native seed planting; plant identification in the surrounding bush; maintaining permaculture gardens and developing a nature trail.

Students of the Marian Catholic Primary School in Townsville participate in daily earth-

sustaining activities based on permaculture principles. They recycle all classroom and playground rubbish, compost mulch, conduct a nursery green house and worm farm and grow vegetables for the tuckshop. The Green Guardians Club supervises their frog pond.

The children conduct school Water Wise and Power Wise audits and participate in extensive school and neighbourhood landscaping in conjunction with Townsville City Council.

The Star of the Sea School at Henley Beach, South Australia, has set up an innovative Marine Discovery Centre (MDC). Among organisations represented on the steering committee are the Catholic Education Office, the Star of the Sea community, Coastal and Clean Seas, Coastcare, Fisheries, Aquatic Sciences, and the City of Charles Sturt.

Tim Hoile, the teacher responsible, describes the project. 'Our aim is to encourage an appreciation and understanding of marine life with a view to promoting conservation and sustainable use. Our School Community, including our parents and students, has embraced environmental learning. Caring for our marine creatures, making displays, marine water-testing, marine murals, supervising small groups of visiting students to the MDC and maintaining the school grounds have all been achieved through this outstanding support.'

Recently the Department for Environment and Heritage approached the MDC with a view towards developing a Leafy Seadragon Marine Education Kit-the first marine education curriculum to be distributed to all primary schools in South Australia.

The Tasmanian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace helped to sponsor an epic journey undertaken by Ben Fox 22, and Ben Buckland, 20, Round the world in 80 ways. Dismayed by the failure of climate change talks in The Hague in 2000, they embarked on a journey to draw attention to the potential catastrophe of global warming.

Leaving The Hague in July 2001 and arriving home in Hobart in February 2002, they travelled through 18 countries using only sustainable, public and locally appropriate transport-bicycle, train, riverboat, and yak. In fact they used 84 different methods of transport and connected with many environmental groups in their travels which were closely followed in the Catholic newspaper, The Standard.

Some Encouraging Signs Among Religious

Religious orders are active in various forms of environmental spirituality and education.

In Wagga Wagga, NSW, the Presentation Sisters have established an Ecological Justice Resource Centre. From their Mt Erin property the Sisters work the land according to Permaculture practices, and teach courses on sustainability in partnership with the local TAFE, schools, university and council.

At Glenburn, Victoria, the Christian Brothers conduct a Centre for Ecology and Spirituality, located in a secluded eucalypt grove. The Brothers offer a practical spirituality of care for Earth and its life.

On the shores of Lake Macquarie, near Newcastle NSW, the St Joseph's Kilaben Bay Wetlands Centre offers retreats in spirituality linked with catchment management principles.

Beside the deep gorges of the Nattai and Burragorang Valley, New South Wales, the Marist Brothers host at Wooglemai Youth Centre, residential weekends of discussion, activities and resource sharing to renew our human participation in the creative expression of the Universe.

In Sydney the Columban Fathers operate the Peace, Ecology and Justice Centre.

The Leaders of Religious Congregations in Queensland support an eco-justice desk within their Brisbane Social Action Office. Relevant campaign and resource material is available on their web-site.

The gravity of the environmental crises and of the challenge ahead is acknowledged. But our journey towards ecological conversion has begun.

Our mission is clearly stated by Pope John Paul II: To protect the radical good of life in all its manifestations and to prepare an environment for future generations that is closer to the plan of the Creator.

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