



Care for creation is an ancient Catholic concern that has taken on a new urgency in recent decades. This Update introduces the topic of environmentalism from a Catholic perspective, including links to our sacraments, term definitions and a new way to look at the traditional Works of Mercy.

Why Catholics Care for Creation

By Joan Brown, O.S.F.

Environmentalism, care for the earth, global warming—these have become hot political issues in recent times. Care for creation is not a new issue for Catholics, though. In this *Update* we'll look at how the Church has understood creation through the centuries. Then we'll see how the gift of the earth is very much tied in with how Catholics celebrate the sacraments. We'll end on a practical note: a way of looking at the Works of Mercy that provides food for thought—and action.

In earlier times, people felt very close to creation. Early Christian teachers, monastics and saints read the book of nature along with the Scriptures. St. Augustine wrote that while the divine Scripture must be listened to and read, the book of the universe must be observed in order to know God. Thomas Aquinas tells us that creation overflows with divine goodness: "God is both transcendent over creation and immanently present in each creature." The Dominican preacher and mystic of the 13th century, Meister Eckhart,

said, "Every creature is full of God and is a book" about God.

Looking to Scripture, we know from the Genesis creation stories that all that God created was "good." God also gave man and woman the responsibility to care for creation. However, "Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth" (Gn 1:28) has often been misinterpreted to justify reckless use of resources. A more accurate interpretation calls for men and women to be caretakers and tenders of the creator's garden.

The story of Noah and the flood reveals that humans are part of the garden, and the rainbow sign of the covenant of love with God was meant for all creation—not humans alone. "As the bow appears in the clouds, I will see it and recall the everlasting covenant that I have established between God and all living beings—all mortal creatures that are on earth" (Gn 9:16).

These and other Scripture stories teach us about the importance of caring for creation by assisting in answering the great questions of life: Why am I here on earth? What is my purpose? What are the guidelines for living and acting morally and ethically? In other words, they teach and form our worldview.

Sacred earth

In our faith tradition we are also given holy people such as Sts. Francis and Clare of Assisi, who remind us that we are not separate from the natural world but part of it in one sacred earth community. St. Francis of Assisi, in his “Canticle of Brother Sun,” sings of all as brother and sister and addresses the elements as Brother Sun, Sister Water, Mother and Sister Earth, Brother Wind and Sister Moon. For Francis, creation is good and *Christic* (“of Christ”) because it bears the imprint of Christ from before the beginning. Francis’ love of Christ comes to a full expression of God’s generosity and the appeal to oneness in the Mystical Body of Christ, which the Canticle proclaims as a cosmic kinship where all are brothers and sisters.

Named patron of ecology by Pope John Paul II in 1979, St. Francis, through his simplicity of life and love for all, offers a model for living in a time of ecological devastation and urgency for new models. *Ecology* stems from the Greek *oikos*, which means “home” and shares the same root with *ecology* and *economy*. Ecological living invites us to care for our home, the earth, through appropriate economy and use of resources of energy, water and food.

St. Francis’ vision of kinship expands the meaning of Matthew’s Gospel command, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39). Our neighbor is everyone, including the economically poor, every creature, plant and element. Our daily life choices reveal our love, especially to those poor and vulnerable who are affected most by global warming.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also instructs that use of the earth’s resources is not absolute: “. . . it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his/her neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation” (#2415).

Works of Mercy in a new way

The 14 Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy can serve as a guide for care of creation. Feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, instructing the ignorant—all the Works of Mercy take on new meaning in light of creation care.

To understand St. Francis of Assisi’s worldview of the sisterhood and brotherhood of all is to re-envision the works of mercy with eyes of wonder and inclusivity. Suddenly everything is held in reverence as mercy spills into every meal, cup of water, walk, time with children, etc. It is not a matter of doing more, but a matter of being mindful and reverent in the doing. Here a few examples that might spur your own reflection:

Feeding the hungry expands to cooking and giving our families, friends, neighbors and the economically poor nutritional food produced and offered with an ethical concern for land, water and creatures. The National Catholic Rural Life Conference’s guide, *Eating Is a Moral Act*, offers a vision of healthy food and just and equitable agricultural practices that support local economies and local agriculture.

Praying for the living and the dead leads us to listen to the voices of people in Africa suffering from hunger and drought due to global warming, of the polar bears becoming extinct as ice caps melt, and of the rainforests and the forest people dying in the struggle to maintain the lungs of the planet.

Giving drink to the thirsty means taking short showers, turning off dripping faucets and conserving water in our homes. It requires knowing our watersheds and living and working to protect regional waters from mercury and other pollutants that affect fish and the entire food chain, which in turn compromises the health of pregnant women, infants and children.

Converting the sinner takes on new meaning for each of us to convert consumer lifestyles to ones of sustainability so there are resources for future generations. Fast from driving one day a week. Think about CO₂ emissions before making a jaunt to the store or taking a trip. Replace incandescent lightbulbs with energy-saving bulbs, reduce CO₂ and mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants.

Keep holy the sabbath by sharing a meal with family and friends or by taking a quiet, leisurely walk in nature rather than racing from shop to shop in the mall. Small sacrifices—turning the thermostat down or up according to the season and wearing appropriate clothing—renew the meaning of *sacrifice*, which means “to make holy.”

Instructing the ignorant becomes educating ourselves and those close to us about ecological challenges and actions that we might engage in. The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change and Interfaith Power and Light are among the organizations that can provide education and action suggestions.

Care of creation holds a long and rich history within Scripture, tradition and Catholic social teaching. Indeed, facing the challenges of global warming, water, food and energy crises are serious moral matters. And, yet, in following the call to live and act responsibly by caring for the future, wonderful opportunities and gifts of community, relationships, new knowledge, creativity, beauty and joy unfold. We become more aware of the fullness of life, the holiness of God!

For Catholics to rediscover the natural world, one that reveals an expansion of God’s blessing, is to be like the one who found a lost pair of grandmother’s wedding pearls. What rejoicing! Our care for creation is a treasure from our tradition to hold and to cherish.

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Clearing up the Confusion

Terms used in understanding creation care can be confusing. Here are a few helps.

Greenhouse gases are part of earth's atmosphere. They let visible light, like sunlight, through. When the sunlight hits white snow or shiny roofs, it bounces back into the atmosphere. When the light hits dark surfaces like soil, energy is absorbed and becomes heat. All this light energy cannot escape back through the blanket of greenhouse gases so it is absorbed and trapped. This energy warms the air and water. Over the last 150 years burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas (which are really sunlight energy) has released more heat energy. So we no longer have the original and healthy greenhouse effect. The earth now absorbs and holds more heat than it radiates back into space.

Global warming/climate change is talked about in terms of the planet heating up too much. The greenhouse effect, like a too-thick blanket, is now translated into global warming that is at least partly responsible for unpredictable and extreme weather events. Quick melting of polar ice caps, large floods, long droughts, crop damage and spread of new diseases are attributed to global warming.

CO₂ is the greenhouse gas spewed from chimneys and exhaust pipes by burning the stored energy of the sun in coal, oil, gas and trees. One hundred and fifty years ago our atmosphere had 280 parts per million (ppm) of carbon dioxide. Today we have 387 ppm. Recent scientific evidence points to 350 ppm as the highest level of CO₂ for a stable earth atmosphere for life to thrive.

Carbon footprint/ecological footprint refers to how much energy we use. The impact upon the planet is called a carbon or ecological footprint. Just as walking in soft soil leaves a mark, so our lifestyles leave a mark. The impact of our footprint depends upon how many of earth's resources we use.

Sustainability refers to the development of systems such as agriculture, housing and energy that can maintain themselves long-term.

Renewable energy is being talked about as one of the solutions in addressing high fuel costs and high CO₂ emissions. It is generated from natural sources such as sunlight, wind, rain, tides and geothermal heat, which naturally replenish themselves.

Ecology is talked about in relationship to every living being and element on the planet. All are in relationship in one system of life. *Eco-friendly or ecologically minded* means that in making choices of food, cleaning supplies and energy use we consider the earth and human life.

Common good is spoken about in Catholic social teaching as the "good" or gifts of God that are shared, keeping in mind benefit and life for all in the community of life.
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