

Every Day CATHOLIC



ST. ANTHONY MESSENGER PRESS ■ www.AmericanCatholic.org ■ G0408 ■ APRIL 2008

Was Jesus a Tree Hugger? Ecology and Faith

by Jim and Susan Vogt

Global warming is a hot topic these days, but what does it have to do with faith?

“Have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing.... See, I have given to you every plant...every tree.... God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:28-31). “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15).

How are we to cultivate and take care of the earth? Scripture can't mean that everyone must become farmers! It does mean, however, that we all have a responsibility to care for the earth. These are easy words to agree to in theory. After all, it feels wholesome to commit to caring for the earth. Being good stewards of creation is wholly holy, natural and reasonable. But it isn't as easy as it sounds. Consider the following quandaries:

The *Consumer's Guide to Effective*



Environmental Choices identifies the use of automobiles as the single most environment-damaging consumer behavior, so Jim urged Susan to take the bus to work. He often rode it himself. After all, we live on a bus line, and it would be “good for Susan's soul.” Jim explained that Susan could use the time to read, meditate and be in solidarity with those who don't have transportation choices. This quadrupled

a 20-minute commute once transfers and waiting were factored in. Susan countered, “That's two hours I could spend at work or with our family. Plus, I lose the flexibility to do errands on the way home, making additional trips necessary.” Susan tried it. She still does it occasionally—for her soul—but there are competing values. What would *you* do?

Growing some produce ourselves is good stewardship. It provides fresh healthy food, saves money and trips to the store, and can be satisfying to the spirit, not to mention good exercise. (Assuming you don't overdo it and have to go to a chiropractor afterwards as Susan once did.) But what about those pesky critters and insects that can delete the fruits of our hard work more quickly than we can delete spam? Should we use pesticides on crops, poison the moles or spend extra on

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“Every action that harms the ecology of the planet is ultimately a personal decision, and every decision is either in accord with or in violation of the will of God. Every decision human beings make is a moral decision; it is either an act of virtue or a sinful act.”

—Father Lawrence E. Mick

A Civil Action

by Frank Frost

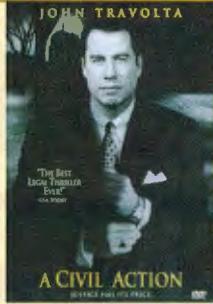
Near the end of the movie *A Civil Action*, we see, in

flashback, some teenage boys taunting a man across a large drainage pond, throwing lighted firecrackers at him in the dark. We know the man has illegally dumped toxic chemical waste from his tannery into the pond, escaping detection for a number of years. Suddenly the pond ignites and, as we watch the flames leap fiercely into the night, we recognize what it symbolizes: An unseen hazard of toxic waste possesses unpredictable power to do harm.

We do in fact already know, from earlier scenes, some of the damage this contaminated water has wreaked: children dead of leukemia, adults disabled with serious illnesses. And while *A Civil Action* is basically a courtroom drama about corporate greed and overreaching by personal injury lawyers, another message also comes across: Such flagrant abuse of the environment could not happen without the passive—and active—participation of many ordinary people.

After one conscience-stricken employee decides to testify about waste-dumping at his plant, his fellow workers react by shunning him. Their jobs are more important than correcting the problem. For them, the cost of changing the situation is as high as it is for the corporations involved, or for the attorney who goes broke pursuing the case.

A Civil Action, based on a real case, is a complex story that allows for moral shading, depicting a world where selfish decisions made by many people can impact the health of a community. One protagonist is a woman of constant courage. Others show only brief moments of courage. Only one man is deliberate in his evil choices. Others are simply “doing their jobs.”



Sr. Carolyn Hoff, O.S.F.

by Joan McKamey

Long before becoming director of Michaela Farm, a farm renewal project of the Oldenburg Franciscans in southeastern Indiana, Sr. Carolyn Hoff was often found outdoors. She spent 18 years working in Catholic high schools, later running the retreat center and supervising house-keeping at her order’s motherhouse, and everywhere she worked, she tells *Every Day Catholic*, “Other Sisters could always find me outside on weekends or days off, sprucing up the yard.”

Directing Michaela Farm is a good fit for nature-loving Sr. Carolyn. A family farm of the Sisters of St. Francis since 1854, it has recently been revitalized to increase awareness of ecological concerns. Its 300 acres include pastures, hayfields, woodlands, prairie, fallow land and gardens. At present, beefalo (a mix of buffalo and cattle) provide the Sisters with rich natural fertilizer (a.k.a. “black gold”) and grass-fed, lean meat.

Michaela Farm is grounded in the Franciscan value of “just relationships with all Creation.” This is expressed in simple living, seeing all creation as “kin,” respectful use of resources, striving for sustainability, and offering gratitude, hospitality and sharing. Beyond supplying the motherhouse residents with fresh produce, the Sisters share the bounty of the harvest with families on limited incomes. They also share their property and vision of ecological stewardship through tours, volunteer opportunities, educational events and a donor tree program.

Sr. Carolyn—and all Franciscans—find inspiration in St. Francis of Assisi’s naming of all created things as our brothers and sisters. Sr. Carolyn finds particular inspiration in two parables—it’s no surprise that they’re about nature—the sower and the seed (Matthew 13:3-9) and the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9). Of the first, she says, “Not all projects, trees, plants or vegetables fall on good soil, so I continually need to evaluate what is happening. I also must evaluate what I have done to spread the idea or seed in the wrong place.”

In the second parable, a gardener convinces a landowner to spare a barren fig tree for one year during which he will cultivate and fertilize it in hope that it will bear fruit. Sr. Carolyn relates this story to her “love of trying to nurture trees and plants or the land to good health.” She says that it is a reminder to “be patient with whatever comes my way at any given moment.”

Sr. Carolyn reflects on her passion for caring for the earth: “The beauty of what God created always inspires and relaxes me. Standing on top of the rolling hills of the farm and looking around and quietly listening to nature can be breathtaking. I also like being down in a valley, feeling small with all the tall hills and trees around.”

St. Francis, the patron of her religious community, is remembered yearly on his feast day, October 4. This is a special day for Sr. Carolyn who says, “I usually take extra time to visit the animals, walk the land and thank God I’m here—wherever *here* is at that moment.”

MOVIE MOMENTS, CONT’D.

Next time you watch *A Civil Action*, ASK YOURSELF:

■ What are moments of conversion for Jan Schlichtmann? When did the case stop being about making money for him?

■ Jan risked (and lost) a lot in order to right a terrible wrong, yet many of us don’t even bother to recycle. What motivated Jan?

■ What motivates *you* to care for the earth?



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It's Not Easy Being Green

by Jeanne Hunt

Scenario

Jon, Erin and their young son walk silently back to their car. The state park is closed. The drought has taken its toll: The parched earth is a fire

hazard and the water level is too low for swimming and boating. "Daddy, how can we fix the brown grass and the dirty water?" their son, Elijah, asks. They have no answer for him. Elijah simply presumes that it is fixable. His daddy and mommy can do anything.

Growing up in the Midwest, I believed that this good, green earth would be there in all its beauty forever. It was self-maintaining, and all I had to do was soak up the pleasure of its bounty. Now I see a different picture: The summers grow hotter, the water is not safe to drink, the air is polluted, trees and animals are dying and the land is being depleted of its resources. So, what can I do to restore the well-being of our earth?

A response

The scenario of the young family out for a day at the park is all too familiar. Recent droughts have been devastating. The normally abundant farms have struggled for a meager crop. We need to correct the wrong we have done so that parents like Erin and Jon can pass on a living earth

to their children. Families can begin to do simple things that will offer hope to children and teach the lessons of good stewardship. We are tempted to succumb to the despair of helplessness. Yet, whatever we do is far better than doing nothing. In the doing, we teach our children to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Here are a few simple ideas that can become part of every family's life:

Plant gardens and trees. Each living thing offers a return to the earth. In the planting, we teach our children the grace of keeping the earth green.

Recycle everything! Creatively reuse what you have. Never have more of anything than you can use.

Use resources such as fuel and coolants sparingly. Ration the amount of fuel you purchase and learn to conserve.

Avoid using paper products. Cloth napkins and ceramic mugs are better options at your table and workplace.

Pray for the earth and all its inhabitants that we will have the grace to keep this planet in the fashion God intended.

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PRAYER



The Blue Marble

by Jeanne Hunt

(for praying alone or with others)

Preparation: Set out a globe, a live plant or flower and a bowl filled with blue marbles.



OPENING PRAYER

"Source of Life, we place the earth in your care once again. Give us the wisdom to know how to tend our little space on earth. Give us the courage and determination to break our unhealthy habits. Fill our hearts with the desire to care for everything around us as gift."

SCRIPTURE

"Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. I think about all your deeds, I meditate on the works of your hands.

O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures. How great are your works, O LORD!

One generation shall laud your works to another; The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness.

For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

The LORD has made everything for its purpose, May the glory of the LORD endure forever; may the LORD rejoice in his works."

RITUAL

"The Apollo astronauts described the earth as a 'blue marble' when they viewed it from space. Please come forward and take a blue marble from the bowl. Keep it in your pocket as a reminder of the commission we have received to keep this earth with wisdom and love."

BLESSING PRAYER

"God bless our land, our homes and all living things.

God preserve all creation and help us to become faithful keepers of this planet.

God bless us. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Scripture references: Ps 66:5; Ps 139:14; Ps 143:5b; Ps 104:24; Ps 92:5a; Ps 145:4a, 6; Ps 92:4; Prov 16:4a; Ps 104:31

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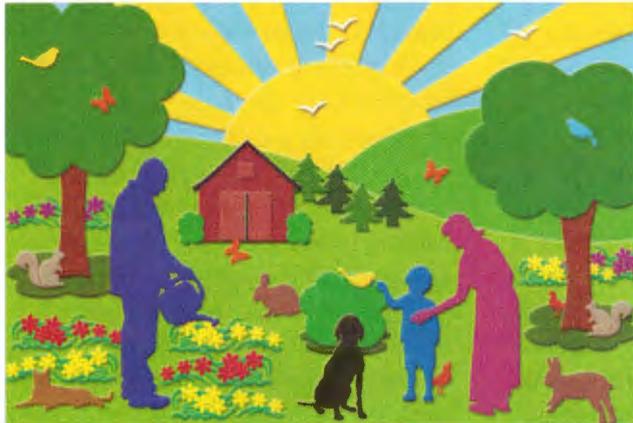
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organic remedies? What if our kids won't eat the apples because they don't look as pretty as the ones in the store?

Two of our children live in foreign countries. Visiting them is a family-bonding experience that also raises our awareness of other cultures—especially the hardships faced by people in Africa and India. Of course, airfare is expensive, and air travel leaves a heavy carbon footprint. But what if our travel didn't involve family but simply the enriching experience of learning about

and decide to do something similar?

Then there is the reality that, as members of the human community, we are not isolated beings dependent only on ourselves. Dispiriting murmurs should be passed through the prism of community. Instead of "What difference will my action make?" we might ask, "What if *everyone* took my action?" What if *everyone* just threw their soda cans into the trash? What if *everyone* recycled them? The "everyone" test can often help us see more clearly.



Margret Courtney

another country? Would it be better to send a donation to a charity in a developing country than travel to experience it?

We know that traditional incandescent light bulbs use three to four times more electricity than energy-efficient ones, but the environmentally friendly ones can look garish. Do aesthetics trump energy savings?

There are plenty of other thorny conundrums for conscientious Christians who want to honor God's creation by preserving and protecting it. In the end, many of us just get tired of the complexity and mixed messages, throw up our hands and murmur, "What difference will it make to the ozone if I recycle a few soda cans each week?"

What each of us does, however, *can* make a difference. First, we must take personal responsibility for our own actions. Whether it's refraining from lying, caring for those in need or respecting the environment, our own actions are the ones we control. We must start by responding consistently to God's call to be faithful stewards of creation. In addition, there is the dimension of witness. Who knows when someone might see our small efforts at recycling

Lifestyles and systems

As Christian stewards of creation, however, we must not only change our own lifestyles, but also work to change systems. As good as it may be to begin using energy-efficient light bulbs, it will make a bigger impact if we work to create systemic change.

This means taking the trouble to lobby government officials for "green" legislation or contact civic leaders about cleaning up polluting industries. Yes, we may have to pay a little more for products in the short run, but we will all pay sooner or later in terms of health and, ultimately, survival. Prevention is always cheaper in the long run.

Another effective "green" thing we can do is support an environmental advocacy group. Taking personal action is often the first step, but we must move from changing a light bulb to changing the system in order to make a real and lasting dent. This approach multiplies our efforts exponentially.

Perhaps we can revisit the familiar maxim "What would Jesus do?" and ask, "Was Jesus an environmentalist?" Well, he did walk a lot, ate organic and local, drank the local water and didn't depend on electricity. Even his garment was recycled at his crucifixion. But he didn't have a choice. We do. Jesus sent us the Spirit to breathe new life into our troubled souls and world. Let us not pollute the gift of creation lest it die on our watch—or on that of our children's children.



Jim and Susan Vogt have four adult children and live in Covington, Kentucky. Jim directs the Marianist Social Justice Collaborative. Susan speaks and writes on marriage, parenting and spirituality. Learn more at www.susanvogt.net.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Can one be a faithful follower of Christ and not care for the earth? Why or why not?

How seriously are you taking your own responsibility for being a steward of creation? How is this played out in action? What more could you do?

Identify moments of courage or conviction in your own life. How do you react when you encounter injustices, large or small, that affect the world we live in?

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St. Anthony Messenger Press
28 W. Liberty St.
Cincinnati, OH 45202
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Permission to Publish:
Rev. Joseph R. Binzer,
Vicar General, Archdiocese
of Cincinnati, 12-19-07

EDITOR:
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ART DIRECTOR:
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