

# CONTINUED...

## Creation

Continued from page 1

### Rooted in church teachings

Although Earth Day is considered a secular observance, honoring the earth is as Catholic as honoring St. Francis of Assisi, probably the church's most famed celebrant of creation. In fact, Pope John Paul II has proclaimed the saint the patron of those who promote ecology, a proclamation buttressed by the following prayer St. Francis wrote:

"Dear mother earth, who day by day unfolds rich blessing on our way, O praise God! Alleluia! The fruits and flowers that verdant grow, let them his praise abundant show. O praise God, O praise God, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia."

The ecstatic experience embodied in that prayer of gratitude is undergirded by the church's belief that God's earthly blessings are not to be toyed with. For example, the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly outlined respect for God's creation as a duty charged to the faithful in the Seventh Commandment — "You shall not steal."

"Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives," the catechism reads (No. 2415). "Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come; it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation."

The pope has also issued several statements outlining his concern for the earth's current plight and future state. Probably best-known was his statement during his 1990 World Day of Peace message on "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility." In it, the pope called the ecological crisis "a moral issue," a point he reiterated as recently as March 24 of this year in a speech at the Vatican, reported by Catholic News Service.

"The aspect of conquest and exploitation of resources has become predominant and invasive, and has reached the point of threatening the hospitable nature of the environment," he said.

In fact, the pope said, the environment has frequently been treated as the private



domain of a few powerful industrial groups, to the detriment of humanity as a whole. The result is damage to the ecosystem and to the health of the inhabitants and future generations.

For U.S. Catholics, another significant environmental message came from the U.S. bishops in 1991, a pastoral letter titled, "Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Action and Reflection on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching."

"As individuals, as institutions, as a people, we need a change of heart to preserve and protect the planet for our children and for generations yet unborn," the bishops wrote.

### Sowing seeds of renewal

In an effort to practice what they preached, the U.S. bishops — through the U.S. Catholic Conference — in 1993 established an Environmental Justice Program designed to help dioceses and parishes spread the church's ecological teachings and offer practical and financial support for environmental action.

Jill Ortman-Fouse serves as EJP's program specialist. In a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier* from her Washington, D.C., office, she pointed out that EJP is part of a larger coalition called the National Religious Partnership for the Environment. The partnership consists of representatives, like Ortman-Fouse, from the USCC; from the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life; the National Council of Churches, a coalition of Orthodox, Protestant and African-American churches; and the Evangelical Environmental Network.

Formed in October 1993, the partnership attempts to bring people of faith together to tackle environmental questions from a religious perspective, according to

the partnership's executive director, Paul Gorman.

The partnership emerged out of a growing awareness by religious leaders that they needed to do more to solve environmental problems, Gorman said in a phone interview with the *Courier* from his New York City office. He noted, for example, that he recently held a retreat for leaders of many of the nation's most prominent environmental groups to help them see their work from a faith-based perspective.

"When people combine their environmentalism with their faith, the reasons for engagement become much more profound," he said.

### A blossoming of effort

The USCC's Environmental Justice Program has undertaken a number of actions to increase respect among Catholics for God's creation, Ortman-Fouse said.

For example, she said, it sent out environmental education resource packets to every parish in the country and sponsored seminars on environmental awareness and social justice.

The program has also provided 90 grants of \$500 to \$1,500 to diocesan and parish programs throughout the country for efforts ranging from teaching Catholic school children about environmental awareness to presenting programs that encourage parishes to clean up their neighborhoods.

Catholic Charities of the Southern Tier oversees one such EJP-funded effort in the Diocese of Rochester, according to Kathy Dubel, director of that Catholic Charities office's Department of Justice and Peace.

Called the Environmental Justice Project, Dubel's two-year-old program has received \$1,500 in funding from the bishops' environmental program, she said. Dubel noted that she has put on educational programs for dozens of parish social ministry leaders — like Derenthal — in the Southern Tier's five counties: Chemung, Schuyler, Steuben, Tompkins and Tioga.

She added that she was inspired to seek USCC Environmental Justice Program funding as she realized that environmental issues were connected to the social justice issues her department was examining. For example, she said, the decline in family-owned farms in her region affects the region's economy as well as its land, and the church needs to help people reflect on the place of both in their lives.

"It just became clear that you can't promote the dignity of the person without looking at where they live," she said.

At the same time, however, Dubel noted that people's concerns have to be integrated into concerns for the earth.

"Everybody needs to earn their bread, so how can we figure out ways to earn our bread without destroying and degrading the environment?" she added.

### Parishes bearing fruit

Catholic environmental experts note

that parishes can do much to raise environmental awareness among the people in the pews by asking the following questions, provided by the USCC's Environmental Justice Program.

• *What are the unique environmental concerns in your community?* Urban parishes have different environmental concerns than rural parishes, and should tailor their environmental programs to meet them. One way to do so would be to contact environmental groups in a parish's area for information.

For example, Sister Lucy Walawender, RSM, social ministry coordinator for St. Anthony/St. Patrick's Cluster in Elmira, pointed out that her parish is working with Chemung County authorities to recycle household hazardous waste products on May 17 at Chemung County Fairgrounds. Parishioners are being encouraged to bring such products as old flea powder, anti-freeze and nail polish remover, she said.

• *What resources do you have?* Will an environmental awareness committee, or parish social ministry committee have a budget for copying and mailing? How many people in the parish are interested in getting involved? If you begin with a small budget and membership, make small plans.

• *Who are your allies?* Local environmental and interfaith groups often have resources for parish efforts. They may also have existing environmental projects parishioners can join, and may agree to support a parish's efforts, as well.

Sister Walawender, for example, said she's working with Chemung County authorities to help her and parishioners label storm drains in the area that are often dumping grounds for hazardous waste. The labels will warn people not to throw hazardous products down the drains, she said, as the substances could endanger the water supply.

• *What is realistic?* There's nothing wrong with starting small. Bulletin announcements can help educate parishioners about such issues as recycling and other eco-friendly practices.

For example, Margaret Ekes, a member of the social ministry committee at St. Mary's Church in Elmira, recently wrote a piece on environmentalism for the parish's bulletins, she said.

• *Into what areas of parish ministry would you like to incorporate environmental justice?* The best parish environmental programs connect such concerns to other parish ministries. Liturgists can work to present services that increase respect for God's creation, for example, or youth groups can start gardens.

It all comes down to thinking of the world our children will inhabit if we don't start preserving the earth, Sister Walawender and others repeatedly stressed.

"We just can't think of our present convenience," Sister Walawender said. "We have the people in the future to think about."

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