



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Environment and the Believer

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Environment and the Believer

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Christian believers may hesitate to use the term “environmentalist” for it is often used disparagingly or they may feel uncomfortable in the company of environmentalists. However, a closer look shows a common agreement, namely, a particular concern for the Earth. A deeper shared insight may be that Earth includes a community of beings -- human beings along with plants, animals, lakes, streams, mountains and all other beings. Still deeper is the understanding that all creatures on the Earth are interdependent and that, when we harm others, we, in turn, are harmed. The wounding of the Earth includes the wounding of ourselves both individually and in community.

Christian believers need do more. Environmental awareness is not only the fruit of our effort, but is a gift of our God, Who gives us the energy to heal our wounded Earth and to attend to our personal wounds. Without God’s grace we do not have the stamina to endure a steady barrage of environmental woes. Left on our own we may attempt escape, excuse denial of an environmental crisis. Keeping a sense of Christian enthusiasm (the God within) is a gift to us from our Creator. Believing scientists and technologists are drawn to go beyond words of concern to direct remedial actions. We have the rational tools to do something meaningful. Being privileged to live in these times means we respond gratefully to the ever-working and cooperating Creator. What follows are some of the many ways that we can make a difference.

1. We are co-creators. Through Baptism, Christians die with Christ so that they might rise with him. We die to our old selves so that we are able to bring “good news” to others. This message has a personal aspect, namely, our striving to be like Christ - and a more social one, namely, that the entire community is redeemed. If community extends beyond the human, as we are becoming more aware each day, then God’s saving power extends to the entire planet and beyond. Believing scientists and technologists value working either singly or as teams to achieve tangible results.

Merely sounding alarms is not sufficient; rather, healing means promoting alternative practices that are environmentally benign and are proportionate to resources at hand. These ecologically resourceful methods or appropriate technologies (E.F. Schumacher’s term) include solar energy cookers and heaters, micro hydropower systems, dry composting toilets, simple organic gardening procedures, and others. Appropriate technologies tend to use local materials, are human in scale, require less expertise, demand cooperative endeavors, and are environmentally benign. (1) These oppose the prevailing consumer culture that finds profit in the more sophisticated, higher priced, expert-controlled, and planned-obsolescence techniques that, when misused, can do so much environmental harm.

2. We cherish past, present, and future achievements. Believing technical people respect what has come before. We accept the good of the past as means to the future and as part of the ongoing process of salvation. We neither walk backwards into the future nor abandon the lessons so painfully learned. We refuse to be a throwaway generation that discards its religious beliefs and spiritualities as though outmoded. A true environmentalist is a true conservationist. By avoiding extremes of retrenchment and abandonment we realize the newness of the challenge to save our Earth, but are confident that tried solutions are worth exploring. The present moment is as precious as the past and must be conserved. We are committed to using this present opportunity to better our Earth, to help re-create even more wonderfully and prepare for the New Heaven and New Earth. The surge of self-worth that we homebuilders experience when completing our humble homesteads allows us to say “We have built this abode -- through God’s grace.” In living fully in this present moment we prepare, anticipate, and co-create our future with hope.

3. *We are a celebrating People.* When a believing community is steeped in liturgical practice it finds technology not something to fear but to be a champion and a liberating instrument. It is no accident, says Zemov, that a people steeped in the celebration of the Eucharist developed a technology. (2) Matter is not something foreign but can be grasped in their hands and through God's grace can be transformed into Christ himself. However, because this process is so monumental, free time is needed for reflection and meditation. Eucharist, the goodness of God's creation, is at hand. (*) This mystery is acknowledged, praised and thanked through the offering of gifts of bread and wine made by human hands -- not natural gifts. A believing people can make holy (consecrate) and partake in a transubstantial event through communion. We can spread Good News, thus extending the people's experience in liturgy -- "the work of the people" -- by adding flavor, excitement, celebration and the joy of the risen Christ. We can appreciate the rhythm of work and relaxation and the great achievements soon to come.

4. *We see science and technology as liberating.* While classical Greeks and Romans recognized the power of wind, water and even steam, they never made connections of harnessing power to save human labor. (3) For the Greek and Roman elite class, human slave or free manual labor was demeaning, merely menial, of lesser value than their own cherished rational and supervisory activities. The Greek and Roman economic systems disdained laborers, even artisans, and never considered labor-saving devices of value, even though, as Casson says, labor upkeep and costs were high and laborers often scarce. (4) Christianity changed this in part through the work and example of the monastery. The simple Christian rhythms of prayer and work extended beyond monastery walls to the lives of nearby people, who, in turn, felt free to relax and celebrate communally even for relatively short periods. The Church's championing of this right to public prayer is expressed in sacred times and places and thus the strict demands of Sundays and feast days where no servile (slave or servant) work be undertaken. A technology that saves (energy and time) becomes a tool or means to liberation, an integral part of the ideal Christian rhythm of prayer and work. 4 Technology made the coffee break possible.

5. *We work and cooperate with others.* The recent innovation of technical teamwork is important for us who are committed to improving the environment. We have a vast job to do, so we see the community of workers as vital, valuing what each does through her or his respective gifts. The U.S. Catholic bishops say in the pastoral letter, *Renewing the Earth*, "By preserving natural environments, by protecting endangered species, by laboring to make human environments compatible with local ecology, by employing appropriate technology, and by carefully evaluating technological innovations as we adopt them, we exhibit respect for creation and reverence for the Creator." (5) But the teamwork does not include merely our immediate peers. To save our planet we need the teamwork of all people of good will, especially those more accustomed to working with few resources, that is, people of modest means and in the Third World.

6. *We confess wounding the Earth and need to make restitution.* We have sinned by misusing the rich but limited resources of our Earth or failing to speak when others did so. Little wonder the story of the fall comes so closely after the creation story. Amid the wonder of creation splendor we need redemption. A collective examination of conscience reveals the wages of social misdeed: polluted streams, acidified air, ozone-depleted atmosphere, denuded forests, eroded slopes, hazardous waste sites remaining untreated and even expanding, scarred hills from surface mining, an increasing number of endangered and extinct species, and other deeds which Edward Echin calls the defiant act of ecological sin. (6) It takes faith both to confess and to have the confidence that divine forgiveness occurs. Being shriven (confession and absolution) includes a willingness to make restitution both to current living human and other creatures and to unborn generations for environmental damage. If we have damaged what belongs to others, we need to do something special to make up for the damage. Healing the Earth is not an optional choice; as repentant people we must help restore the broken social order. Only with genuine forgiveness can ecojustice be reestablished on an Earth redeemed in the blood of Christ.

7. *We need to use proper discernment.* Environmental work requires a critical concentration of human and financial resources and technologies, in fact, more than ever before undertaken. These are needed for monitoring, collecting data, testing, diagnosing remedies, initiating and conducting the painstaking process of Earth healing. This requires instruments, materials, technical skills and experience. Through suitable tools and application we

recognize the damage done (diagnosis), we try to conserve resources for others (ecological first aid), we discover that our inexperience is costly (insight), we communicate with others to overcome barriers (consultation), and we move on to a new creation (cure). During the process we also arrive at judgments that some tools are too dangerous given their nature and the condition of the handler, *e. g.*, nuclear power generation. We gradually come to the understanding that the health of the tool user is just as important as the adequacy of the tool itself.

Proper discernment leads to practical approaches to healing the Earth. We prioritize real wants from the non-essential. We locate nearby sources for bulky necessities such as food, water, fuel and building materials in preference to distant ones and thus save resources. We shift attention from centralized planning to decentralized water collecting and purifying systems, dry composting toilets to reduce water use, a multitude of solar applications and growing one's food locally. We don't neglect ideas, for they need to flow freely with proper and sometimes complex systems of communication, *e.g.*, computers, telecommunications and human travel. Schumacher stated that at the level of appropriate technology "there is an almost total lack of effective international communication."
(7)

8. *Our Faith Journey is one of ongoing growth.* Proper discernment allows us to be open to progressively deeper calls to perfection, faith, power, attitudes concerning the poor and ecojustice. (8) Our healing, as with all healing, is developmental. We are not converted in an instant, but over a long period of time involving the ups and downs of human and spiritual growth. The manner in which we regard our science and technology indicates something about this spiritual pilgrimage. The believer's quest for God is never-ending and so we strive for ever deeper levels of spiritual growth AND technological understanding. We go from doing things because we want to learn, to doing things for others because they need the works of our hands; we come to points where we see our own weakness and inabilities and throw ourselves in God's hands. We find that through the power of God we can do still more, and we seek to identify ourselves with a broader community of faith.

Concern for this Earth involves practical skills and expertise and invites humbling self-correctives. No individual dream exceeds the hope founded in social justice that all have a decent living, namely, wholesome food, clean water, a safe and comfortable home, proper recreation, a basic education, good health and a good environment. How else to make these dreams a global reality except by tackling the trillion dollar world annual defense budget which could in great part be converted from military to social needs? The Our Father's "give us this day our daily bread," has special meaning. When we are fully in solidarity with the poor, they become "we" as a community, and we can again sincerely say this prayer. The Earth remains festering and unhealed unless the one-fifth of the globe's population of have's shares with the four-fifths of have-not's. Class divisions are not perpetual. Redistributing wealth and resources is part of healing our planet -- and we need an ever deepening spirituality to answer this profound call.

9. *We are called to re-create our immediate environment.* Believers show this deepening spirituality through practical results. The community where we reside and work should demonstrate sustainability. We cannot be silent as the community plunges from one wasteful level to another. If we are in a college, then the institution ought to be conserving resources, returning landscape from ornamental to edible areas, using renewable energy, curbing conversion of green-space into parking areas, offering foods which are less resource-intensive, and a host of other simpler lifestyle methods and procedures. We cannot remain silent in a sea of poor ecological design. We need to be spiritual enough to hold our cool and knowledgeable enough to propose and help implement ecological solutions. We must join a team to initiate the work of creating our environment anew and expect that it will take time to implement. (9)

10. *We prepare the Earth for the coming of the Lord in Glory.* Some believers become quite otherworldly in their aspirations and regard it as more suitable to neglect this Earth or even use up resources as though they have some special privilege through their sacred insights. Far from being a community that rejects immediate responsibility and idly looking for the last days or for some total destroying event, we need to act with deliberate speed so

that the Day of the Lord will soon come. And we must work together with all people of good will. (10) It takes immense effort on the part of all the People of God to put this house in order. If we truly believe, then we will act in ways to hasten the day of the healing of the Earth and the Lord's coming. (2 Peter 3:11-13).

Endnotes

1. Ken Darrow and Mike Saxenian, *Appropriate Technology Sourcebook*, Stanford, California: Volunteers in Asia Publications, 1986, p. 7.
2. Nicholas Zemov, *Eastern Christendom*, New York: Putnam, 1961.
3. Lionel Casson, "Godliness & Work," *Science*, 81, pp. 36-42.
4. A lengthier discussion is given in chapter seven of my book, *Renew the Face of the Earth*, Chicago: Loyola Press, 1987.
5. "Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching," U.S. Catholic Conference, November 14, 1991, p. 7.
6. Edward Echlin, "Dare ecology use the word 'sin'-", *The Month*, May, 1993, p. 206.
7. E.F. Schumacher, *Appropriate Technology Journal*, 1976 as found in Darrow & Saxenian, 92. op. cit. p. 6.
8. *Earth Healing: A Resurrection Centered Spirituality*, 1994, by Bob Sears, S.J. and this author, in press.
9. *Eco-church: An Action Manual*, San Jose: Resource Publications, 1992.
10. Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," 1990, no. 15.

Editorial Commentary

* The theology here is difficult. What the author says can be briefly (though still incompletely) stated as follows: The Eucharist, the changing of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, is Christ's sacramental presence to us now. He is no longer present as He was to His disciples and the people of Judea. Pope John Paul II stresses that the Eucharist makes the Church, that is, the foundation of the Church is the Eucharist. Without that sacramental presence of Christ, there would be no Church. Thus, the Church herself is a sacrament in a broader sense. That means that the Church is a sign; it points to reality beyond itself. As part of the Church, we and our activities, individual and communal, are also signs of the world to come. As part of the Church, based on the mystery of Christ's Eucharistic presence, our activity, in accord with God's will, is "transubstantiated" into the fullness of God's final Kingdom, heaven. As stated, the theology here is dense and needs much further exposition. [Editor]

Questions

How best can believing scientists/technologists work together to effect a healing of the wounded earth. Mention specific projects.

What obligation does a believer have to become actively involved in working to improve conditions on the earth?

What role does Baptism play in this duty or privilege? Discuss the enigmatic statement: Nicholas Zemox writes that "... a people steeped in the celebration of the Eucharist developed a technology." How does an appreciation and love of the Eucharist lead to a developing technology?

How do the sacraments, particularly Baptism and Eucharist tie into an environmental ethic?

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