Caring for the Commons
Creation, Church, and Community

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The environmental crisis, as Pope John Paul II first indicated in 1990, is a major problem of our time. Other Catholic church leaders began to address environmental issues at the end of the last century. The writer of this essay reflects upon this growing body of literature and suggests a path for a creation-conscious pastoral ministry.

Pristine places have provided the context for most human-divine encounters. In the Bible and in other sacred texts, and in the oral traditions of indigenous peoples throughout the world, stories abound about a revered leader’s unexpected experience of the Spirit on a mountain, in a desert, along a river, or in another place distant from human companionship or constructs. The pivotal experiences of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus in the wilderness, stories of Buddha under a tree and Mohammad in a cave, and images of Francis singing his canticle of creation in the forest near Assisi, all remind us that God-transcendent is also God-immanent. God presences the cosmos and seeks intimate communion with people in creation.

Today, too, people develop spiritually not only through communal religious rituals held in dedicated sacred spaces, but also through encounters—often unanticipated—with God stimulated by God’s signature in nature: the sparks

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and traces of God that stimulate us to go beyond the visible material reality of our world to participate in the invisible spiritual reality whose signs are all around us. When we acknowledge that in God “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), we become more aware of signs of the Creator in creation, and are open to profound experiences of the presence of God in the world of nature.

As people become conscious of God’s presence in, and discern their own relationships to the broader natural world of which they are a part, they become more aware of and distressed by devastation in creation. They note that the earth is treated poorly and the earth’s goods are distributed inequitably. They wonder why the earth’s abundance is not meeting people’s needs, as God intended; why earth is being exploited for human wants, to the detriment of its ability to provide for human needs; and why people who are called to image a loving, creating God instead are ignoring God and destroying God’s creation. Their observations and questions might lead them to realize that earth is a commons, a shared common ground. Then they might seek to resolve evermore pressing pastoral concerns: How might people see more clearly that the universe is permeated by the presence of God? How might their spiritual life, their employment, and their everyday activities incorporate their new clarity of vision? How can they acknowledge the sacredness of creation as an expression of God’s imaginative and continuing creativity? How might earth’s lands and goods better provide necessities for the human family and for the extended biotic community (the community of all living creatures)?

Catholic social teachings are instructive for formulating responses to these questions. In the last decade of the twentieth century, church documents increasingly expressed concern for the well-being of creation. Stimulated by the 1990 publication of Pope John Paul II’s Message, The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility, the bishops of the United States and Canada released regional and national pastoral letters focused on environmental issues.

In his Message, Pope John Paul II declared: “Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith” (n. 15) The Pope states that concern for creation is not an optional addition to spiritual life; it is an “essential” aspect of religious belief. In their attitudes and actions Christians are to take seriously their role as caretakers of creation.

Another recent Catholic environmental statement was released in January, 2001. The U.S. and Canadian bishops of the Columbia River Watershed issued
the Church’s first bioregional document: *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*. This pastoral letter focuses on the ethics, economics, and ecology of an area which transcends provincial, state, and national boundaries. In the introduction to their pastoral letter, the bishops call for “an integrated spiritual, social and ecological vision for our watershed home, a vision that promotes justice for people and stewardship of creation” (1). This vision contains the two basic elements of Catholic teaching on the environment: care for creation and care for community; people share common ground and should be concerned about the common good.

In these and other church documents, pastoral ministers find insights for educating Catholics about their responsibilities for their local environment as both parish communities and as individual parishioners, and for engaging people in practical projects to reflectively experience and responsibly care for creation.

**A Sacramental Universe**

The U.S. bishops’ 1991 national pastoral letter, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* offered a distinctively Catholic way of viewing creation. The bishops spoke of a “sense of God’s presence in nature,” and observed that “through the created gifts of nature, men and women encounter their Creator.” Then the bishops offered a “Christian vision of a sacramental universe—a world that discloses the Creator’s presence by visible and tangible signs” (5, emphasis added).

The bishops of Alberta, Canada picked up the theme of the “sacramental universe” in their 1998 pastoral letter, *Celebrate Life: Care for Creation*: “Catholics see creation in a ‘sacramental’ way.... God is present and speaks in the dynamic life forces of our universe and planet as well as in our own lives. Respect for life needs to include all creation” (2). The U.S. and Canadian documents reflect the beautiful biblical teachings in Wisdom: “You love all things that are. . . your imperishable spirit is in all things!” (11:24; 12:1); and: “From the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen” (13:5).

These sentiments are recalled also by the Canadian and U.S. bishops of the Columbia River Watershed: “Each portion of creation can be a sign and revelation for the person of faith, a moment of grace revealing God’s presence to us. Our minds and spirits can catch glimpses of God in moments of solitude, reflection and grace in God’s wondrous creation” (Columbia River, 7). The regional bishops go on to say that, “[a]s the whole universe can be a source of blessing or revelation of God, so also the commons of a local place can be revelatory. . . Signs of God’s presence are evident in all of creation” (8). In *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995) the Appalachian bishops express, in a complementary poetic way, the sacramentality of creation and the relationship and interdependence of all creatures:
The mountain forests are sacred cathedrals, the holy dwelling of abundant life-forms which all need each other, including us humans, with all revealing God's awesome majesty and tender embrace. . . . (Appalachian, 5).

The bishops of the Boston Province state in *And God Saw That It Was Good* (2000) that Catholics should be educated about this presence of God in creation and about their responsibility to care for creation: “The contemplation of God's goodness as manifested in creation and a focus on Christian devotion to the care of the earth should become hallmarks of Catholic education” (Boston, 5).

All of creation, from the grandeur of the stars to the life of creatures of the air, land, and waters, all the elements and energies and events and entities of the extensive sacramental universe and its localized sacramental commons, should stimulate in us Creator-consciousness and creation-consciousness, creation-care, and community-care.

The created universe is dynamic, not static. When we are open to the presence of the Spirit in creation, we can experience the creative power of God at work, we can feel that the universe is evolving and ultimately good. We realize that, in the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Creation has its own goodness and proper perfection, but it did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created ‘in a state of journeying’ (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it” (n. 301). Along the journey, fellow travelers in creation can become conscious not only of who they are and what their place is, but also of their integral ecological relationship with their regional biotic community and with the character and rhythms of the Earth they share as their common home.

**A Sacramental Commons**

The “sacramental universe” is particularized for the person of faith in a “sacramental commons,” a place within an individual's or a community's space which at special moments is revelatory of God-immanent. The presence of God can be experienced unexpectedly in such sacred space (a potentiality which ultimately is present in all pristine creation) when one is open to seeing signs of God in the world.
of nature. Sometimes a spontaneous sacramental moment reveals divine presence and activity in dynamic creation in a vision or new insight; at other times it is through an overwhelming consciousness of the Spirit. In diverse ways, people experience sacramental moments in sacramental places of the sacramental universe.

**The Commons and Common Ground**

Human beings are part of creation, not above it or otherwise distinct from it. Within creation, in their own local commons or while visiting a different local commons, people can come to understand the complex common ground they share with other humans and other creatures: spiritual common ground, social common ground, scientific common ground, and spatial common ground.

**Spiritual Common Ground**

In the Christian tradition people share the commons as spiritual common ground. Their insights about God flow from the Bible, church traditions, and Christian faith informed by spiritual experiences which transcend time and place. In their shared spiritual traditions, they acknowledge that all of creation, flowing from God-transcendent and presenced by God-immanent, is very good. They come to realize that just as God cares for all of creation, they, too, have a special role in creation: as images of God-caring, they are to be caretakers of those areas and aspects of creation entrusted to them to meet their needs. They come to understand that the whole universe is revelatory of God to the eyes of faith, and that in a local commons they find universal but also unique signs of the creating and renewing Spirit.

**Social Common Ground**

Christian communities share the commons as social common ground. They are members of the human species, and part of the human community. Human beings are social beings: they gather in groups in which the particular gifts of each contribute to meeting the needs of all. They come to recognize that they are interdependent, and that cooperation and collaboration, more than competition, will enable them to support each other in economically and ecologically sustainable communities. In the words of *At Home in the Web of Life*:

[T]he people are God's co-creators,  
called to form sustainable communities,  
and to develop sustainable livelihoods,  
all in sacred creative communion  
with land and forest and water and air,  
indeed with all Earth's holy creatures (Appalachian, 5).
The place in which a community is located influences human interaction and livelihood. Interaction often is based on occupation; livelihood flows from occupation; and occupation is directly or indirectly related to the natural features (soil, water, wind, solar) or goods (minerals, fish, trees) of a place. The social common ground is intimately based on and dependent upon the spatial common ground. Exploitation of natural places and goods ultimately harms the social common ground in the short- or long-term. Conservation, a reasoned use and wise distribution of natural places and goods, helps the social common ground.

**Scientific Common Ground**

Christian communities share the commons as scientific common ground. As educated members of human societies, they understand, with diverse personal and professional levels of sophistication, that fundamental laws of physics, chemistry, and biology interact in the universe, and that scientific investigation provides data that describes interactive processes and their products. As spiritual members of human societies, people understand that the freedom and the dynamics of the cosmos are not eternal nor did they suddenly emerge from nothing; they are energies and elements and events and entities whose essential characteristics and parameters were envisioned and created by God-transcendent. Their being and becoming are permeated by God-immanent, but God allows their ongoing interactive creativity to have the freedom to explore a variety of possibilities with a multiplicity of potential outcomes.

The Church today carefully analyzes scientific understandings, including some with ecological implications, that seemingly contradict religious understandings. Religious reason (“faith seeking understanding”) probes for truth in these circumstances. Since the creation of the universe and the inspiration of the Bible have God as a common source, scientific and religious truths are ultimately compatible. Although biblical literalists juxtapose faith and reason, and the Bible and science, the U.S. bishops declare in *A Pastoral Statement for Catholics on Biblical Fundamentalism* (1987): “Biblical Fundamentalism tends to interpret the Bible as being always without error, or as literally true. . . . [But] we do not look upon the Bible as an authority for science or history” (U.S. Bishops’ Ad Hoc Committee, 5). Earlier in church history, in the fifth century, St. Augustine wrote that where science and the Bible conflict, the Bible should be taken allegorically. The *Catechism* and Augustine teach that biblical and scientific truths ultimately are complementary, not contradictory.

The theory of evolution is currently an area of faith-science conflict because some biblical literalists and some atheist scientists make it so. In contrast, Pope John Paul II stated in an address to an international gathering of scientists (1996) that “new knowledge leads to recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis” (Associated Press, 16).
We live in a dynamic, evolving, physical universe. Simultaneously, we are part of a dynamic, evolving, cultural universe. The overlap of the two might be seen in developing human understandings of the sun. In ancient Egypt, Greece and Mexico (and in other cultures) the sun was a god: Aton, the sun-disk, in Egypt; Helios in Greece; Tonatiuh in Aztec Mexico. People worshiped this “divine” being which provided light and warmth. But human knowledge and perceptions changed: the divine circle became a sphere and then a star, a mass of flaming gases; the god became a creature and the depth of its being came to be analyzed scientifically rather than theologically. Science helped religion to gain new understandings about the sun’s being and activity.

There was also a time when it was an “obvious” scientific and religious “fact” that the sun, no longer a god but a heavenly body, revolved around the earth. Then along came Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, and biblical and Aristotelian constructs became like falling stars transformed into meteorites; the realities of heavenly bodies and their movements came to be known.

What is “true” or the fullness of “reality” is not necessarily just what is seen by our eyes, telescopes, or microscopes. The sun went from circle to sphere, and was understood then in all its complexity and depth of being in this conceptual (but not actual) transformation. Other initial perceptions of aspects of the material universe become a foundation for, but not the fullness of, knowledge of material and metaphysical realities.

Some scientists try to reduce the totality of reality to the elements and energies that can be quantified, replicated, and falsified through physical experimentation: a simplified disk is easier to analyze and explain than a celestial sphere. But those who experience the presence of God-immanent, and those who have had glimpses, “indistinctly, as through a mirror” (1 Cor 13:12) of that divine presence, realize that simple explanations of what is ‘reality’ can be merely simplistic explanations. Just as a flat disk can be transformed into a spheroid star, and in the process its true being and function as the center of the solar system can be understood, so, too, if we look carefully into reality and are open to new existential possibilities and surprising complexities, a more complete understanding of the totality of reality is given to us.

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Spatial Common Ground

Christian communities share the commons as spatial common ground as well. In their local space, they depend on the goods of the earth to meet their needs. These needs must be integrated with those of other creatures who share the same home and habitat. The spatial common ground has vital air, land, and water, and provides other benefits that make it a suitable locus for human life and a suitable base for human livelihood. When they become truly native to their space, people come to appreciate its natural beauty as well as its practical benefits; they also see other members of the biotic community as relatives, in a certain sense: all share a remarkably similar DNA base; all trace their ancestry to the creative power of God, back not only to the first life forms emerging in earth's waters, but beyond them to the cosmic dust that burst forth from the primordial explosion that began the great adventure of the continuing birth of the universe. More than is the case with other aspects of the shared commons, in spatial common ground people are especially linked with the other members of the biotic community. Existing in intertwined ecosystems, the community of all life exists most fruitfully when its members live in a balanced relationship with each other.

The Common Good in Creation

The idea of a ‘common good’ emerged as people came to understand that there are certain community benefits that become operative in society only when individuals commit themselves to promoting the well-being of the citizenry as a whole. With this understanding, communities are better able to meet their most basic needs for adequate, life-sustaining food, clothing, shelter, water, and energy. The Alberta, Canada bishops note that a continuing theme in Catholic social teaching has been the common good. This refers to the whole society being organized through its social, political and economic institutions so that all individuals, families and communities can thrive and seek their own good. Today, clearly this traditional understanding of the common good needs to be expanded to include a healthy natural environment (Alberta, 3).

The “healthy natural environment” is the context, the spatial common ground of the community, and more: it is a place of clean air, potable water, and healthy soil; and it is the ambience within which the entire web of life is woven, and from which it draws its sustenance. To extend the concept of the ‘common good’ to incorporate this environment is to include other living creatures as part of the ‘common’ sharing the good, and as members of an extended community sharing the ‘commons’. At Home in the Web of Life declares:
[1] In the name of the culture of life, we insist that all people and the rest of nature form but a single and precious ecosystem, created by the God in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Appalachian, 7).

The Appalachian bishops go on to call for a “return to the traditional Catholic teaching about the common good,” which means:

- the common good of all people,
- the common good of the entire ecosystem,
- the common good of the whole web of life (57).

### Community Engagement with Creation

Christians inspired by awareness of the presence of God in the universe and in the commons, and conscious of the commons as their shared spiritual, social, scientific, and spatial common ground, seek to fulfill the caretaker role which is an “essential part of their faith.” A parish as a whole or through its individual parishioners can minister to its own members, to the broader social community, and to the integrated earth community in diverse but complementary ways.

A parish should undertake structural and landscape inventories to determine if its buildings are energy efficient, if their insulation can be improved, if their heating and cooling systems need repair or replacement, if more trees (which beautify places and cleanse the air) should be planted to provide a summer shade and winter shield, and if lawns contain native grasses which require little or no maintenance (thereby saving water, eliminating lawn chemicals, and reducing gasoline for lawn mowers: all of which save the parish money).

New construction on parish and diocesan levels should utilize appropriate alternative building materials, and incorporate long-term energy conservation measures such as energy efficient windows and passive and active solar energy techniques and technologies.

Parishes should explore diminished use of gold and other materials whose extraction or refinement harms the earth and the health of people and other creatures. Just as asbestos once was installed in elementary schools to protect children, but now is being removed to protect children, so, too, since chemicals used in gold mining harm the biotic community, and since most gold is used for jewelry, gold should be reused or alternatives to it should be found so that creation might be conserved.
Recycling campaigns (newspapers, aluminum cans, corrugated cardboard, glass) in parishes can raise needed funds for youth groups while promoting conservation.

Most fertilizers, herbicides, and insecticides are harmful to people, pets, water supplies, and beneficial soil organisms, and their use should be greatly reduced; weed and insect infestations often can be reduced by the use of natural biological controls.

Parishes and educational institutions should use chlorine-free recycled paper to eliminate the dumping of harmful paper plant effluents into rivers.

Parishes and individuals should support local and regional organic farmers at farmer’s markets, and encourage managers of local supermarkets to buy locally. As much as possible, Catholic schools should buy locally grown organic produce, and officials of public schools should be encouraged to do so also.

Homes of the poor and elderly should be weatherized through government programs, utility company programs, and voluntary work by local contractors; materials might be donated by local building supply companies.

Parishioners should organize walks through city parks, or hikes through state, provincial, or national parks, by individuals, families, or small groups of people. The purpose of these activities is to discover the meaning of a “sacramental commons.” Leaders should ask people to retain in their mind or on paper a significant image or idea to share with others at the end of the walk.

Parish groups should reach out to environmental groups for mutual education and joint projects. Environmental organizations would bring their expertise about environmental issues and community projects to care for the environment. Parish members would bring their consciousness of the commons as God’s creation. Both could be committed to restoring and conserving ecologically important areas while promoting economically sustainable communities. Sierra magazine (Nov/Dec 1998) highlighted religious involvement in environmental issues in a feature story, and urged mutual respect and further cooperation between environmentalists and faith communities.

Parishes might organize, or encourage students to participate in school and parish science projects that describe local wildlife and ecologies, identify ways in which people benefit from them, discuss why it is beneficial for people to have a clean and healthy environment, and promote environmental conservation.

In urban parishes, field trips could be organized to parks, to nature-respective zoos, and to natural history museums so that parishioners might better understand and appreciate the diversity of the biotic community, and become involved in promoting its well-being through communication with industry and government officials and by support for environmental organizations.

These parish ministry activities will enable people to be aware of the common ground they share, and to be active in promoting the common good of those who
share their local commons. They can help people to understand what the Cana-
dian and U.S. bishops mean by a “sacramental universe.”

Creation weaves an intricate and beautiful tapestry of being. Creation-
conscious ministry will strive to instill in congregations an appreciation of that
tapestry in all its complexity, and a commitment to care for it in its continuous
emergence from its primordial origin in the vision and power of God. Care for
creation will sustain the commons and promote the common good.

Our experience of the Creator in creation, linked with our experience of com-
munity in the commons, will enable us to go forth with the Spirit, as individuals
and as Church, to renew the face of the earth.

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