



CATHOLIC SCHOOLS OFFICE

Diocese of Salt Lake City

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: Caring for God's Creation

In the U.S. bishops' statement *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, we are reminded that "on a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan; it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored." There are voices all around us who are concerned about the way we are harming the environment by our lifestyle. Whether we accept the green house effect or not, we know that it is our role to do what we can to protect our earth for ourselves and for future generations.

Part of the Social Justice curriculum of the Catholic schools includes care for God's creation. Our schools teach this in many ways. Programs to reuse and recycle have become a regular part of school life as well as teaching children to clean up around them. We remind the students that reusing goods rather than throwing away items which can be useful should be a priority. Our books and buildings have to last as long as possible, not just to save money but to conserve earth's resources which go into producing and building them. Children have learned to share gently used clothing and books.

In areas of care of self and others we stress washing hands, covering ones mouth when coughing or sneezing, eating nutritious food, taking sufficient rest, and exercising for good development. This emphasis is covered in school wellness programs. How is health part of the social teaching of the Church? Creation is everything God made, including human beings, therefore, care for ourselves and others is a moral imperative. Every action we take can help or hinder creation. Teaching children to care for a family pet builds awareness of the needs of living things. Recognizing our role in mutuality is the responsibility of each of us, school and home.

In our science and religion curriculum opportunities are provided to encounter nature and learn to care for it. A spirit of awareness can provide a reciprocal benefit to ourselves and nature. Beauty around us can lift our spirits and provide a release of stress. How can we look at the beauty around us without expressing praise and thanks to the Creator?

As students get older there are numerous ways to expose them to the complexities of care for God's creation. It is definitely a counter-cultural view. Areas include using alternate forms of energy, xeriscaping, water conservation and reuse, and use of public transit when one is able. Looking at global concerns we can educate the students on world trade issues and inequitable distribution of the world's goods and wealth. Some schools are choosing to sell free trade products for fundraisers which teaches students to recognize exploitation of peoples in other areas of the world. Current events can be studied in light of the Gospel values of poverty, service and caring. Teaching

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students media literacy can decrease gullibility and the need to have everything that is advertised. Exposing students to those who are less fortunate in our country and the world can shape the way they deal with people and other created things. Consumerism is selfish because it does not take into account those who have little or nothing; it does not consider those who come after us who may not have resources which we have squandered. We must live in harmony with the rest of creation and preserve it for future generations.

One of the greatest evils confronting the entire planet today is “the relentless and ever-more powerful attack by humans against the natural world, against the very life-support systems of the planet. We are poisoning the air, water, and soil, altering the climate, denuding forests, destroying wetlands and wilderness, and driving countless species of plants and animals to extinction.” (Jane Blewett, Founder and Director of Earthcommunity Center, Laurel, MD) Most of the devastation of the planet has been done by humans in a short period of its history. We were once taught that humans alone were made in the image of the creator and were thus put in charge. The new cosmology is an emerging gift and insight which traces the origins of the universe back some fifteen billion years in time. It situates humans within the evolving journey, within the community of interdependent life forms, not as the pinnacle of a fixed and ready-made created order. “It is an on-going story, sacred to the core, with each member of the community, plant and animal, wind and water, sun, moon and stars, playing an essential role in the survival and sustenance of the whole. Ecology means just that. . . the whole household, the relationships that make it possible for each member of the household to live and be sustained.” (Jane Blewett) We cannot divorce our well-being from the well-being of the natural world.

The United Nations “World Charter for Nature” states, “Convinced that: every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man, and, to accord other organisms such a recognition, man must be guided by a moral code of action...” . Ten years later at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, there was an acknowledgement of the absolute and urgent necessity to create sustainable societies, sustainable ways of life, on every continent that provide for viability and well-being of all of creation. It is the challenge of Catholic social teaching to recognize the dignity of all of creation just as the dignity of the human person has been valued. We can be the voice for all of creation in recognizing its part in the whole of life. Justice for people, justice for the Earth, are two sides of the same coin.

Vatican II invited the Christian community to a new maturity and encouraged us to read the “signs of the times” in order to find direction for our Gospel living. One sign of the times is the “cry of the earth”. There is a bond between humans and the earth which can be equated to the bond between human and human, human and God. As intelligent beings it is our responsibility to protect people and the planet. Our stance should not be to dominate creation but to provide the environment in which all creation can flourish. There are numerous ways we can educate ourselves in the theology of creation. Praying scripture is a great source of looking at creation through God’s eyes. In Paul’s letter to the Romans 8:19-23 we read, “For all creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God. . .that creation would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains until now.” Will we assist the earth in its birthing and redemption or will we hinder the progress? It is very much in the hands of the human community to protect that which cannot speak for itself.