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## RESPECT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

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Many citizens could be cited as examples of people concerned about and caring for their environment: the neatness of their personal properties, periodic cleaning of river- and beachfronts, care given to developing green spaces, and an intelligent use of our water resources, all of these are important signs of respect for creation. However, what are we to say of the irremediable damage done in the name of progress or urban development? I hope that the following excerpts on “The Christian Ecological Imperative” published by the Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops will incite us to watch over the creation of which we are the stewards.

### WONDER AND FEAR

The beauty and grandeur of nature touches each one of us. From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine. Humans live within a vast community of life on earth. In the Jewish and Christian religious traditions, God is first described as the Creator who, as creation proceeded, “saw that it was good.” God’s love for all that exists was wondrously evident then, remains so now, and invites the active response of humankind. To enter into ever-deeper relationship with God - this “Lover of Life” - entails striving to develop right relations with nature and with other human beings. But life on earth today is plagued with an unprecedented and accelerating ecological crisis. Deforestation, species extinction, climate change, ecosystem collapse, contamination of air and water, and soil erosion are just a few of the enormous ecological problems which we face in Canada and elsewhere in our world. How many of us remember a childhood spent playing under the sun, a beach we were once able to swim at, a river we were once able to drink from – but no more!

### RELIGIOUS CRISIS

God’s glory is revealed in the natural world, yet we humans are presently destroying creation. In this light, the ecological crisis is also a profoundly religious crisis. In destroying creation we are limiting our ability to know and love God. “The ecological crisis is a moral issue” and “the responsibility of everyone,” says Pope John Paul II. “Care for the environment is not an option. In the Christian perspective, it forms an integral part of our personal life and of life in society. Not to care for the environment is to ignore the Creator’s plan for all of creation and results in an alienation of the human person.” Throughout history, each people’s religious beliefs have conditioned their relationship to their environment. Some Christians have developed the ecological acumen of saints. Others seem to have misinterpreted the Genesis account to “subdue” the earth and establish “dominion” over all living things. Pope John Paul II has emphasized the need for “ecological conversion,” and we are encouraged that many Christian traditions are responding actively to the ecological crisis.

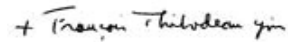
### ECOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The bible teaches about an equitable distribution of resources, including sharing land, animals and water. This insistence on justice is often directed towards distributing the bounty of the earth and providing for those who are marginalized. The profound interconnection between God’s care for humans and care for the environment is noted in Psalm 146, in which “The maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them ... secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry ... sets prisoners free ... gives sight to the blind ... raises up those who are bowed down ... protects the stranger [and] sustains the orphan and the widow.” Ecological problems are enmeshed within social structures that serve the interests of the few at the expense of the many, especially those marginalized and in poverty. Water is the source of all life, and a primary symbol in religious traditions. Water cleanses, purifies, refreshes and inspires. The bible speaks of living waters, of becoming a fountain of living water, of longing for running water, and of justice flowing as a mighty river. Yet how can

anyone speak about the “waters of life” if these waters can no longer sustain life? As Thomas Berry writes, “if water is polluted it can neither be drunk nor used for baptism. Both in its physical reality and its psychic symbolism it is a source not of life but of death.” Without water everything dies. Water is the basic element through which all life forms emerged, exist and flourish. Water is the life-blood of the planet, and maintains an intricate and delicately balanced circulation system that has evolved for over four billion years. Water not only serves the common good, but is part of the common good. Today, water is threatened almost everywhere on earth. Many water systems are over-saturated with contaminants and carcinogens. The diversion and damming of rivers has resulted in drought, and in deserts where lush ecosystems once thrived. Ground water is diminishing and aquifers are mined. Bulk exports of thousands of gallons of freshwater are planned as if such ecological trauma would leave no negative footprint. These realities pose grave risks to human health and food security, as well as to the future of entire regions. The world’s fresh water resources are finite and are now becoming market commodities, no longer public goods. Currently, inadequate access to safe drinking water affects the well-being of over one billion people, and 2.4 billion persons lack access to adequate sanitation. Some persons living in urban slums in poor countries are forced to pay between four and one hundred times more for water than their middle and upper class fellow citizens. No wonder that for persons living in poverty, water has become, in the broad sense of the concept, a right to life issue. The tragedy of seven deaths and thousands of illnesses in Walkerton, Ontario, as a result of a contaminated water system has brought this concept into the Canadian consciousness, as well. All serious solutions to the ecological crisis demand that human beings change our thinking, relationships and behaviours in order to recognize the interconnectedness of all creation. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one. Ecological harmony cannot exist in a world of unjust social structures; nor can the extreme social inequalities of our current world order result in ecological sustainability.

#### LOVE LIFE!

All of creation is of God, and is as yet unfinished. We are called as co-creators to join God’s work to repair some of creation’s wounds which have been inflicted due to our ecological sins. We are also called to creative actions of solidarity with those who have less access to the benefits of God’s bountiful creation. The “Lover of Life,” who came so that we all might have life, and have it abundantly, continues to provide us with opportunities to renew the face of the earth. How can we not take up that challenge?



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