

New Mexico Catholic Conference

"PARTNERSHIP FOR THE FUTURE"

A pastoral statement of the Roman Catholic Bishops in
New Mexico May 11, 1998

We, the Catholic Bishops of New Mexico, out of our concern for the people and land of our state, commend the following statement for personal reflection and public action:

Increasingly we are aware of the critical environmental devastation which faces our planetary home. Evidence of environmental degradation surrounds us: "The smog in our cities; chemicals in our water and on our food; the loss of valuable wetlands; radioactive and toxic waste lacking adequate disposal sites; threats to the health of industrial and farm workers. Poisoned water crosses borders freely. Greenhouse gases and chloro-fluorocarbons affect the earth's atmosphere for many decades regardless of where they are produced or used." (1)

Our own state, New Mexico, is not exempt from increasing global and regional environmental crisis. At the same time there are particular issues which confront us here. Water, especially in our desert environment - its careful and equitable use while protecting it from pollution - places before us the continuing challenge of responsible stewardship. In several areas of our state waste deposits and mining pollution affect both human settlements and the natural environment.

Along our southern border with Mexico, the consequences of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) require active participation in building the long-term bilateral infrastructures which will bring environmental and social justice issues onto an equal footing with the economics of international trade.

Pope John Paul II calls us to recognize that this crisis is at its core a deeply moral challenge: "Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past . . . A new ecological awareness is beginning to emerge . . . The ecological crisis is a moral issue." (2)

The moral challenge begins with recalling the vocation we were given as human beings at the beginning of Creation. Genesis 1.26 tells us that God created humankind to "have dominion" over all creation. However, the use of "dominion" in Genesis does not imply unrestrained exploitation; rather it is a term describing a "representative" and how that person is to behave on behalf of the One who sends the representative. We are God's representatives. Therefore we are to treat nature as the Creator would, not for our own selfish consumption but for the good of all creation.

The first step in responding to this mounting crisis is to reclaim our vocation as

responsible caretakers of the earth, its living and natural resources. The parables of Jesus indicate quite clearly that we will be called to give an accounting on how we have managed our stewardship responsibilities.

The second step comes from another part of the creation story (Gen 2. 15) where humans are made in the image and likeness of God. This part of the story suggest that we are brought into being to continue the creative work of God, enhancing this place we call home. In addition to representing God's creative love for the earth, humankind is also responsible for ensuring that nature continues to thrive as God intended.

Catholic tradition has consistently seen the universe as God's dwelling, and therefore affirms a sacramental dimension to it. Perhaps no one person better represents this tradition than St. Francis as illustrated in his Canticle of Praise: "Praise be my Lord for our mother the Earth, which sustains us and keeps us, and yields diverse fruits, and flowers of many colors, and grass."

A summary of Catholic Social Justice teaching suggests the following themes for religious teaching and moral debate:

- ◆A God-centered and sacramental view of the universe which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth.
- ◆A consistent respect for human life which extends to respect for all creation.
- ◆A world view affirming the ethical significance of global interdependence and the common good.
- ◆An ethics of solidarity promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community.
- ◆An understanding of the universal purpose of created things which requires equitable use of the earth's resources.
- ◆An option for the poor which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world.
- ◆A conception of authentic development offering a direction for progress which respects human dignity and the limits of material growth. (3)

In light of Scripture, Tradition, and Social Teaching, we call upon the people in New Mexico to take upon ourselves this moral challenge, which begins with a call for the conversion of our hearts and minds, our values and lifestyle and moves to reclaiming our vocation as God's stewards of all Creation. We invite the members of our Church to examine our behaviors, practices and policies as individuals, as families, as parishes and institutions, to see where we might take steps to cease the destruction of our planetary home and contribute to its restoration and flourishing.

* We invite our families to teach their children how to love and respect the earth, to take delight in nature, and to build values which look at long-range consequences so that their children will build a better place for their own children.

* We invite our celebrants and liturgists to incorporate in their prayers and themes our confessions of exploitation and our rededication to be good stewards, to organize occasional celebrations of creation on appropriate feast days.

* We invite our parish leaders to become better informed about environmental ethics so that religious education and parish policies will contain opportunities for teaching these values.

* We invite our public policy makers and public officials to focus directly on environmental issues, to seek the common good which includes the good of our planetary home, to eradicate actions and policies which perpetuate various forms of environmental racism, and to work for an economy which focuses more on equitable sustainability rather than unbridled consumption of natural resources and acquisition of goods.

* We have a singular responsibility to the present condition and to the future. Many of the decisions we must make will mean for many of us a reduction in consuming and being more intentional in our lifestyle choices. Indeed, it is the promise of the New Heaven and the New Earth which lies at the heart of Christian hope, a promise we as faithful stewards either enhance or contradict with our behavior and lifestyle. Yet, if there is to be a future, if we are truly partners in shaping the promise of the New Jerusalem, the new "City of Peace" we can do no other. God gives us the courage to pray: "Send forth thy Spirit, Lord and renew the face of the earth."

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**Most Reverend Donald E. Pelotte, S.S.S., D.D., Ph.D.
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ENDNOTES

(1) "Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on the Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching." Nov. 14, 1991,p. 1.

(2) Jan. I, 1990. Quoted in "Renewing the Earth".

(3) "Renewing the Earth", p.5.