



Reverence for Life and Care for the Environment: Call to be Stewards of Creation

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We all know the story of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis 1 - *"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth... and God saw how good it was... God created human beings in his image; in the divine image God created them... God looked at everything that he had made, and he found it very good"*.

God was very pleased with his creation. Six times throughout the process of creating, God stopped, observed his work and saw that it was good. God was enjoying the work he had done. The very fabric of creation reveals to us that not only is everything God created good, but also that creation itself reflects the grandeur of God. On final inspection of all that he had made after creating human beings, God regarded it as "very good". God entrusted to human beings, the ultimate object of God's love, everything that he created, the universe and the environment where we live now, our common home.

Every sign of life is a reminder of God's handiwork and God's own life which calls us to revere and praise God always. One of the best teachings in life is, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Nature gives us so many things for free – clean air, clean water, beautiful landscapes, breath taking views, and the list goes on... We take so much from nature, but what do we give in return? Yet, as we all know, that creation is groaning, feeling the pain of being abused, plundered, and ravaged. Will there be rebirth and fulfilment of a new creation? Are we aware of the impact that we have on the environment? The signs of the times call us to environmental conversion, to be co-creators and caring for the source of life and our common home. **It's where we live, so we'd better take care of it!**



SEE

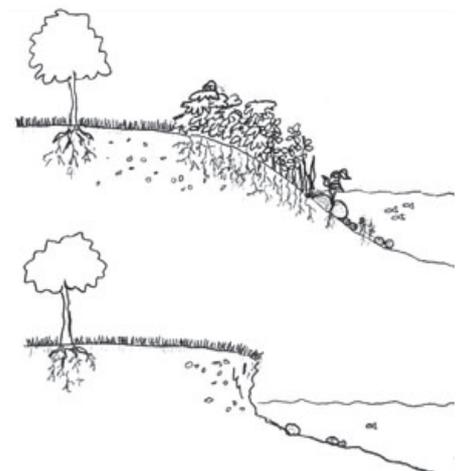
Some concrete environmental situations in many parts of our global village adversely affecting our common home as well as our lives, since we are interconnected and living in communion with one another and the rest of creation:

According to the UN Science Daily the top environment issues are: global warming, ozone depletion, air and water pollution, acid rain, waste management, deforestation,

desertification, soil erosion, land degradation, over-exploitation of natural resources, overfishing, nuclear power, toxic chemicals and more. Most of these environmental issues are the result of human activity on the biophysical environment. Environmental destruction and degradation has been caused almost entirely by humans. These issues have an adverse effect on us.

Some Facts:

- **Global warming** is causing climate patterns to change. Yes, **climate change** is real and we are largely responsible because our activities have released large amounts of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Yes, small changes in the average temperature can lead to frequent occurrences of dangerous weather patterns and devastating storms, heat waves, droughts, wildfires, and floods — all are now more frequent and intense. The fact is that the 12 hottest years on record have all come in the last 15 years. Moreover, and it is sad to note, climate change is causing local extinction of Plant and Animal Species...it has already occurred in 47% of the 976 plant and animal species. *Dec. 8, 2016 Daily Science.*
- **Water scarcity:** Only three percent of the world's water is freshwater and 1.1 billion people lack access to clean, safe, drinking water. By the middle of this century more than a third of all counties in the lower 48 states will be at higher risk of water shortages with more than 400 of the 1,100 countries facing an extremely high risk.
- **Biodiversity Loss and Species Extinction:** Biodiversity refers to the variety of plants, animals, and other living things in our world. We have many of the basic necessities that we need to survive because of biodiversity. We need food that various species provide to eat, water to drink, air to breathe, and materials to provide shelter and other necessities. Yet, we, humans have destroyed numerous animal and plant habitats due to resource consumption, agriculture, and industrialization. The destruction of forests, contamination of marine systems, and manipulation of land for agricultural and industrial purposes has misplaced and/or eliminated animal habitats. This loss threatens food security, population health and world stability. Climate change is also a major contributor to biodiversity loss as some species aren't able to adapt to changing temperatures. According to the World Wildlife Fund's Living Planet Index, biodiversity has declined by 27 percent in the last 35 years. *"We should judge every scrap of biodiversity as priceless while we learn to use it and come to understand what it means to humanity."* – E.O. Wilson (*American Biologist*)
- **Soil Erosion and Degradation:** Unsustainable industrial agriculture practices have resulted in soil erosion and degradation that leads to less arable land, clogged and polluted waterways, increased flooding and desertification. According to the World Wildlife Fund, half of the earth's topsoil has been lost in the last 150 years.



- **Waste Disposals:** Humans living in many societies are naturally wasteful: paper, food scraps, yard trimmings, old electronics, packaging, metals, etc. Practically everything purchasable comes with some type of packaging or wrapping that is thrown away. If not managed correctly, waste can emit hazardous toxins into the environment, harm animal habitats, and pollute land and water. In addition, there's the industrial waste that is emitted from factories, mining activities, agriculture, petroleum extraction, and other processes. The management of human waste will no doubt be an area of concern in coming years due to the increasing population and human consumption.

Almost all the countries in the world may have experienced a specific environmental issue and faced many challenges of its effects.

Here are some which may help us know more about our own:

- The gas pipeline between Canada and the United States is a threat to environmental safety.
- The Philippines' high levels of pollution are destroying the airways of people trying to breathe.

- Brazil is struggling to maintain the Amazon even as there are efforts to build thirty new dams in the rain forest for more access to electricity. Thirst in the United States for the least expensive way to do water treatment damages the future drinking water. (*Social Analysis for 21st Century – Ma. Cimperman p. 19*)
- Opencast mines in many parts of India damage land surface area, displacing people and causing agricultural losses. (*2015 VIVAT India- Input*)
- Reflections on the water crisis in El Salvador and beyond: There is a stretch of the Pan-American Highway heading west out of San Salvador where each end of the socio-economic spectrum in El Salvador is vibrantly evident.
- Civil wars in the Middle East and Africa, as stated in the UN Environment Program (UNEP), continue to sacrifice the high valued natural resources such as land, water, oil, diamond and other minerals, agricultural crops, creating food insecurities and displacement of peoples.
- High nuclear weapons/nuclear power plants for war of the most powerful countries ravage the entire environment and people's lives, thus increasing the incidence of poverty for the vulnerable sector, the poor.

JUDGE

When I see the heavens, the work of your hands,
the moon and the stars which you arranged,
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little less than a god,
with glory and honor you crowned them,
gave them power over the works of your hand,
put all things under their feet,
all of them, sheep and cattle,
yes, even the savage beasts—
birds of the air, and fish
that make their way through the waters. (Ps. 8:3-8)



This vision combines the two basic dimensions of Scripture’s view of creation: the glory and majesty we may contemplate in what God has made, and our surprising dignity as active stewards of the world, despite our mere *being creatures*. Saint Francis of Assisi best expressed the concrete implications of this insight in encouraging his followers to contemplate creation and to praise God “in all creatures and from all creatures.”

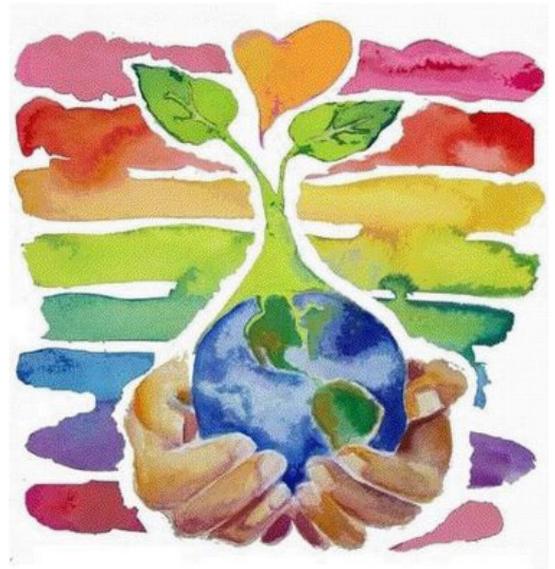
Since the first moment of creation, God has provided for the needs of his creatures and, likewise, has ordered all of creation to its perfection. Hence, man’s dominion over creation must serve the good of human beings and all of creation as well. Thus, dominion requires responsible stewardship. Such stewardship must uphold the common good of humanity, while also respecting the end for which each creature was intended, and the means necessary to achieve that end. If man exercises dominion in a way that ultimately destroys nature’s creative potential or denies the human family the fruits of creation, such action constitutes an offense against God’s original plan for creation.

In thinking about our relationship with the environment, then, we must distinguish carefully between disordered human action, which harms creation and – by extension – human life and property, and responsible action, which the Creator intends for the good of the human family and creation. According to a pastoral statement by the United States Catholic Conference, “As faithful stewards, fullness of life comes from living responsibly within God’s creation.”

Indeed “in the twentieth (twenty first) century the glory of the human has become the desolation of the Earth. The desolation of the Earth is becoming the destiny of the human.” (Thomas Berry)

The above statement of Thomas Berry is in fact true, as we become conscious of our doings/practices in life that make our common home ill and even call them progress and development, a need of modern technologies for a fast changing life pattern, capital and investment for economic development, instant-consumerism lifestyle that created a throwaway culture, etc. Indeed we have unleashed the vast devastation of our common home...exhaustion of earth’s vital resources. These realities are externally favorable for some elite groups but unfavorable for many people because they are causing imbalanced opportunities (more for others-less for many). Yet all share the consequences of all the unwanted big catastrophic events in life.

The realities mentioned sacrifice all forms of life that eventually lead to our own destruction. Ecological concern has now heightened our awareness of just how interdependent our world is. Some of the gravest environmental problems are clearly global. In this shrinking world, everyone is affected and everyone is responsible, although those most responsible are often the least affected.



Social Teachings of the Church:

Regarding the Vatican’s Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, para 470, Pope Francis said: “Creation is not a property which we can rule over at will; or, even less, is the property of only a few: Creation is a gift, it is a wonderful gift that God has given us, so that we care for it and we use it for the benefit of all, always with great respect and gratitude.” Furthermore, his Encyclical Letter on care for our Common Home, *Laudato Si’* calls for “ecological conversion”. It calls for a dialogue on how we can protect and care for our common home and how together we can put into practice ways of sustainable and integrated action for development.

Furthermore, in Pope Francis' letter to Cardinals Koch and Turkson, dated 6 August 2015, he said: "The ecological crisis thus summons to a profound spiritual conversion: Christians are called to 'an ecological conversion' whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them" (ibid., 127). For "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience". In the Catholic tradition, the universal common good is specified by the duty of solidarity, "a firm and preserving determination to commit oneself to the common good," a willingness "to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other[s] instead of exploiting [them]" (Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [=SRS] no. 38). The ecological problem is intimately connected to justice for the poor. The poor of the earth offer a special test of our solidarity. Authentic development supports moderation and even austerity in the use of material resources. It is encouraging the proper use of both

agricultural and industrial technologies, so that development does not merely mean technological advancement for its own sake but rather that technology benefits people and enhances the land.

Pope John Paul II has called for Christians to respect and protect the environment, so that through nature people can "*contemplate the mystery of the greatness and love of God*". Reverence for the Creator present and active in nature, moreover, may serve as a ground for environmental responsibility. As faithful stewards, fullness of life comes from living responsibly within God's creation.

SSpS Document:

From the history of our Congregation and onwards, we have taken a stance for justice and peace and the care and protection for the integrity of creation. Our recent Congregational Directions from the 14th General Chapter with regards to our efforts to widen the circle of Communion towards Creation stated: "We have grown in the awareness that all creation and life is interconnected and reflects the love of the Triune God. The Spirit has taught us to see that our mission to share 'life in fullness' encompasses not only all people, but all of creation. We realize that Mother Earth has been violated and deprived of her dignity. As she suffers, so does all life.

- "We evaluate our lifestyle and our ministries through the lens of integrity of creation."
- "Our decisions and plans reflect our commitment to justice for creation"
- "We engage in ministries that protect and promote the life and wellbeing of all creation."

ACT



"Take good care of creation. St. Francis wanted that. People occasionally forgive, but nature never does. If we don't take care of the environment, there's no way of getting around it." Our changing environment prompts us to stop and think about how we live on our planet. We are called to respond and to adopt new ways of living as Pope Francis highlights in his encyclical, *Laudato Si': On the Care of our Common Home*.

The earth and all life on it are part of God's creation. We are called to respect this gift. We are responsible for taking care of the world we live in and for sharing all the wonders and resources the earth gives us. We are called to be stewards of creation.

Do we take up our part consciously so that we can respond to the call for continuous “ecological conversion” in our daily life as we move forward evaluating our lifestyle and our ministries through the lens of integrity of creation? (cf. SSpS Directions – 14th General Chapter) and as Pope John Paul II said, “protecting the environment is first of all the right to live and the protection of life”.

Simple questions to be asked and to reflect upon:

1. What are the environmental issues in the place where I am/ we are now?
 2. What are the main environmental problems that I/we can address?
 3. What does the effect on the environment mean to me/us?
 4. What can I/we do now, maybe little efforts that I/we can contribute to help protect and preserve our environment?
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We echo some challenges for us today:

- Our prophetic dimension of religious life calls us to a lifestyle of simplicity and reverence for all creation.
- We continuously read the ‘signs of the times’ which call us to be in a continuous process of discernment.
- We use our resources in establishing networks and ways to communicate the message and the warning of this threat to life.
- We, through our spiritualities and charisms, recognize our commitment to reconciliation and the restoration of harmony.



- We acknowledge that we are coming from an ethic of the common good and an ethic of solidarity with those in pain and in need of care.

Some thoughts and responses which might be helpful:

We care for creation as a God-given responsibility. Every environmentally conscious step which can make an important impact with changes, no matter how small the action may be, can help the planet better to sustain life.

In South Sudan and in the Southern part of Ethiopia, we, SSpS, have committed to take part in taking care of the environment. We aim to deepen our consciousness of our interconnectedness with our environment by encouraging sustainable lifestyles in our communities and creating awareness with our mission partners. And even though we are a small part of the world as a Congregation, others are sure to take note of our good actions, resulting in a domino effect that will magnify the benefits of our stance.

We all might have done or are continuously doing some simple and easy practices to protect and restore the environment in our communities, institutions and projects/programs, involving women, children, youth, and farming communities wherever

possible, and tapping the participation of the Church, non-government and government people.

- Walk or ride a bike to reduce carbon traces; use public transport instead of taking a car everywhere.
- Grow your own food by having your own garden to eat organically, avoid genetically modified foods, and reduce the need for polluting farming machineries.
- Segregate waste, providing waste baskets/containers in many places for waste disposal.
- Minimize use of plastics and unrecyclable materials; use reusable shopping bags, preferably paper bags; opt for a reusable water bottle.
- Buy sustainable products and organic food, if growing our own food isn't an option, in order to support local farmers.
- Install a low-flow showerhead or use a bucket in taking a bath to lessen water consumption, thinking of people who have a limited supply of fresh, drinkable water.
- Promote energy saving stoves for cooking and the use of natural biogas; energy saving light bulbs and other means to reduce consumption of electricity.
- Promote use of solar energy
- Establish tree nurseries, transplanting seedlings and drought resistant plants
- Construct soil dams to prevent erosion
- Encourage the use of compost, avoid using chemicals such as inorganic fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, etc.
- Promote the agriculture practices of multi-cropping and intercropping in farming communities; construct rainwater harvesting structures.
- Keep old electronic devices, try not to upgrade to the latest version of any gadget if the device you own continues to work well, to avoid accumulation and need for a big storage. If you need to, deposit your old version at an e-waste collection center (if available).
- And many others, which we can add to the list.

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.

We are called to work together locally and internationally to show concern to humanity, to protect the planet's environment and care for the earth that supports life. Ecological integrity is an essential part of all faith traditions and is an important issue around which dialogue, collaboration, mutual understanding and solidarity can be promoted.

"A greater sense of inter-generational solidarity is urgently needed. Future generations cannot be saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources." (Pope Benedict XVI).

St. Arnold said: "God's all merciful goodness and power embraces even the smallest and the least important creature." The whole of creation has been created by the Word of God and is the Word of God. Thus, through creation, the source of life and environment in which we live, God speaks to us.

