

Lost and Found: Catechesis on the Care of Creation

by Jeffrey Kaster and Craig Gould

Where is care of creation in the catechetical curriculum? Why is it so often lost or left out? What could influence catechetical leaders to prioritize focus on this theme? How can space be found in the curriculum for environmental stewardship? As two program directors of Lilly Endowment-initiated theological programs for high school youth, we seek to explore in this column why theological reflection on the care of creation is so often lost within catechesis and how it might be found.

A personal story from the Youth in Theology and Ministry program (YTM) at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary in Collegeville illustrates why the care of creation is so often a lost part of the catechetical enterprise. YTM engages high school youth in Catholic social teachings as part of its thirteen-month curriculum to cultivate excitement for theological learning, foster Christian discipleship, and promote leadership for church and society. One evening catechetical session explored the meaning of the Catholic social teaching theme of care of creation. The lesson explored the theme's meaning and included watching a section of Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*. Each participant then went to a computer lab to calculate his/her carbon footprint. Finally the lesson provided space for prayer and reflection on the moral implications of our care (or lack of care) for the environment.

A few days after this catechetical session, the YTM community celebrated the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In my personal examination of conscience I (Jeff) recalled the carbon footprint calculation I had done during the evening session described above. I had discovered that my personal carbon footprint was double the US average and ten times the world's average. I was convicted that my use of carbon was sinful. I went to individual confession and confessed this sin saying to the priest: "I recognize that my personal use of the world's resources is sinful in its impact on creation. My sin is that my personal carbon imprint is ten times greater than the average human being. I am sorry and seek to change my carbon footprint on the environment." The look on the priest's face was precious. It was one of complete confusion. He muttered something like, "I don't really think this is a sin. I've never heard anyone ever confess this as sinful."

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Why is care of creation missing from catechesis? One reason is that we have not effectively connected environmental stewardship to morality and the practices of Christian discipleship. Like the priest in the confessional, we just can't imagine what Christian discipleship has to do with environmental stewardship. Too often Christian discipleship focuses on devotional practices, a robust prayer life, liturgical worship, a heightened sense of personal morality, and sacramental reverence. Environmental justice and care for creation are missing. Rarely are they connected directly to the practices of Christian discipleship. If catechetical leaders have not been convinced of the morality and importance of environmental stewardship as a constituent practice of Christian discipleship, then how can we expect them to include this in the religious education curriculum for adults, youth, and children?

The Ecological Crisis

On September 27, 2013, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its fifth assessment on global climate change using the best available scientific data. The conclusions they draw are both astounding and frightening. They offer many conclusions based on the environmental effects that are clearly evidenced by their research, but in summary they report that the earth's temperature, and in particular its surface water temperature, is accelerating rapidly, due in most part to the effect of human beings and their use of carbon dioxide. A few of the main points from their findings, found in the *Summary for Policymakers* report, are:

- It is now considered even more certain (> 95%) that human influence is the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.
- Sea levels are rising faster now than in the previous two millennia, and the rise will continue to accelerate – regardless of the emissions scenario and even with strong climate mitigation.
- Over the last two decades, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets continue to lose mass, glaciers continued to shrink almost worldwide, and Arctic sea ice and Northern Hemisphere spring snow cover continued to decrease in extent.
- Climate change will persist for many centuries, even if emissions of carbon dioxide stop.¹

Climate change and a rising sea level can have catastrophic consequences for millions of human beings. This may be the most important moral issue facing humanity. Scientists have been predicting the dire effects of global warming for years: sea level rise and increased coastal flooding, longer and more damaging wildfire seasons, more frequent and intense heat waves, health impacts, an increase in extreme weather events, changing seasons, and disruptions to food supplies.² Virtually every sector of intellectual academia, including theology, has sought to respond to this phenomenon by asking what impact this has on their discipline. However, despite these inroads, environmental issues remain very much on the periphery of modern catechetical efforts.

Christian Discipleship in the Twenty-First Century

Christian discipleship in the twenty-first century must include practices of personal and corporate environment stewardship. The theological argument for this proposition rests on the famous introductory words of *Gaudium et Spes* from the Second Vatican Council: “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age,

1 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Fifth Assessment Report, Climate Change 2013: *The Physical Science Basis, Summary for Policy Makers*, http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5-SPM_Approved27Sep2013.pdf.

2 *Global Warming Impacts*, Center for Science and Democracy, http://www.climatechange2013.org/images/uploads/WGIAR5-SPM_Approved-27Sep2013.pdf.

especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ”(no. 1).

The principle of the common good demands that followers of Christ are concerned for peace, human rights, the protection of religious freedom, and the care of the environment.

If climate change and rising sea levels have the potential to adversely impact millions of humans, especially the poor, then for the sake of the common good, followers of Christ must address it.

Catholic catechetical documents are currently focusing on evangelization and fostering Christian discipleship. The *General Directory for Catechesis* and the new evangelization documents by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) highlight the fostering of Christian discipleship and maturing conversion as a lifelong process. The church is called to be a community of disciples using its gifts and talents to participate in Christ’s mission of proclaiming and realizing the reign of God. Catholic catechesis today is all about discipleship!

Clearly the church is seeking to advance environmental stewardship and Christian discipleship. In our opinion catechesis has failed to connect the two.³ We believe connecting Christian discipleship with environmental stewardship will be instrumental to successful catechesis in the twenty-first century.

Inconsistent Church Leadership

On one hand the church is supportive of connecting environmental stewardship with discipleship practices. Pope Benedict XVI, who is often referred to as the “green pope,” said at the 2010 World Day of Peace, “If we want justice and peace, we must protect the habitat that sustains us.”⁴ His pontificate highlighted care for creation as an important part of church doctrine. Pope Benedict also approved a plan to cover part of the Vatican with solar panels—enough to power the heating, cooling, and lighting of the entire Vatican.

The USCCB synthesizes Catholic social teaching into seven themes. Concerning environmental stewardship, they wrote, “Care of the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith...this environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored.”⁵

One might assume from the statements above that environmental stewardship is well integrated into catechesis. However, taking a deeper look into the catechetical focus of the bishops of the United States reveals this is not the case. The USCCB document *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School Age* (2007) identifies six elements in the core curriculum. Nowhere in these six core courses is there an exploration of the Catholic social teaching on care for God’s creation. It is only mentioned as one of five areas of electives. In 2010 the USCCB Committee on Evangelization published an adaptation of the original document for use in parish and youth ministry programs. This document left out Catholic Social teaching completely. It is clear that the care of creation is not a catechetical priority of the Catholic Bishops of the United States. On the one hand the bishops are supportive of integrating environmental stewardship into Christian discipleship, but on the other hand the bishops are virtually ignoring the issue within their approved curriculum for adolescents.

3 See *Go and Make Disciples: A National Plan and Strategy for Catholic Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1993); *General Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998); and *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004).

4 Catholic Church and Pope Benedict XVI, “For the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” January 1, 2010.

5 “Seven Themes of Catholic Social Teaching,” <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/seven-themes-of-catholic-social-teaching.cfm>.

What makes the USCCB's devaluing of the care of creation all the more important is the fact that their *Doctrinal Framework* is the template that catechetical publishers are using to produce their materials for youth ministries. Thus the absence of environmental concerns is multiplied all over the country in both diocesan offices and parish staffs. Catechetical leaders, already concerned with all of the complications that come with running a comprehensive formation program, often do not have time to evaluate what is included or excluded in a purchased curriculum. Even if they do, taking their cue from hierarchical leadership, they will relegate Care of Creation to a small and almost non-existent component.

Failure of Catechetical Leaders

It is perhaps easier to blame the US Catholic Bishops or curriculum publishers for the neglect of this essential element of catechesis than it is to admit our own neglect as catechists in this area. Yet in our pedagogical choices as catechetical leaders, we have systematically neglected the stewardship of the environment within our catechetical curricula. The problem is not simply with the bishops. We catechists are the problem! The problem is our failure to include environmental stewardship within the catechetical curriculum.

Craig's Story

In six years as a parish youth minister I had the opportunity to review and use many different curricula to fulfill the catechetical component of youth discipleship. Yet not once did I intentionally shift my pedagogical focus to narrow in on environmental concerns. While publishers provided material, ultimately I had the final say in the focus of each night's session. If I had really felt that a conversation on the health of the planet was necessary to help our young people be fully Catholic I could have given the issues pertaining to being green a full session or even a couple of weeks. Either because of the often political nature of the topic or my own uneasiness and ignorance of the scientific data, I found it easier to ignore the demand discipleship placed on practices of caring for creation. The reality was, though, that I (mistakenly) agreed with the publishers and believed those sessions to be not as necessary as other topics such as prayer, sin, service, and church teaching.

In practical terms this meant that, at best, environmental concerns were relegated to a sub-component of Catholic social teaching, which is often a sub-component of the "Service and Justice" section, which is of course a sub-component of moral theology. Putting that all together means that if the average catechetical year has around 26 weeks and runs about one hour per session, environmental concerns are probably getting about 10-15 minutes of attention per year. That is certainly not a lot of time spent on a moral issue that can impact millions and has consequences for both the sacramental world and the ability of all human people to live in dignity.

These choices continued in my new role as the Director of the Peacebuilders Initiative with high school youth and theology at Catholic Theological Union (CTU). One of the first tasks was to plan the theological sessions that we use to engage students. Each morning of their six days on campus a faculty member from CTU engages youth in theological learning. I was pleased to see that one of these mornings was devoted entirely to the conversation of Catholic social teaching. I was even more delighted when the presenter asked me what within the themes of the Church's rich array of social topics she should focus on. Knowing that it is difficult to incorporate all seven principles into a two hour session, I asked her to focus on what I felt to be the most basic: life and dignity of the human person and the call to family, community, and participation. I did not even consider care for God's creation as essential.

In my formation I had been trained that dignity for the human person was the foundation of all of the other principles and that the call to participate in community was the second most essential task of a disciple. What I failed

to realize in simply accepting this preordered hierarchy of importance was that by prioritizing the life of the human person as separate from creation, I was giving the impression that we could separate the human life from the concern for its environment. In addition, though I chose community participation as a way to enliven the students to give of themselves to those around them, I failed to consider that perhaps the single most important issue of the twenty-first century, the one that affects every family and every community, is global climate change. In retrospect it seems I should have considered that care for God's creation actually does a better job creating a foundational vantage point of Catholic social teaching than any other topic.

Jeff's Story

In my thirty-five years of catechetical ministry in parish, diocesan, and university settings I am sorry to admit that I have personally had very limited focus on the care of God's creation within catechetical programming. As a parish youth minister in the 1980s I coordinated a variety of retreat and wilderness experiences which included worship in natural settings and had several casual discussion of environmental stewardship. But generally within the catechetical curricula for confirmation and youth group meetings, this catechetical theme was lost or missing.

As a diocesan director of youth ministry for ten years in the 1990s, I do not recall one gathering of youth ministry coordinators in the diocese where environmental stewardship was the main topic of discussion. Nor was this theme integrated into the confirmation retreats I designed for diocesan retreat teams. I coordinated ten diocesan youth rallies for thousands of youth and I do not recall one keynote speaker speaking extensively on the care of creation, nor do I recall many workshops devoted to this.

Currently, the YTM curriculum does a better job of focusing on environmental stewardship. Nearly every year since its inception in 2000, Dr. Bernie Evans has taught high school youth a theology class focused on environmental justice. Also, a significant aspect of the curriculum during the second summer is Catholic social teaching. Care of creation is discussed but it is often not the primary focus. The themes of life and dignity of the human person and option for the poor and vulnerable are currently receiving the majority of instructional time.

YTM is structured as a two-summer catechetical program for high school youth. A very important part of the YTM curriculum is engaging youth in service justice projects back in their home parishes and communities. Teams of youth with an adult mentor return to their parish communities to create a project that provides service or promotes justice. These projects are instrumental in the learning that happens at YTM. Youth learn Christian discipleship by doing service and working for justice. As I reflect back on the hundreds of projects completed by youth who attended YTM, I regret to say that only a few of these projects focused on environmental stewardship. Writing this article has helped me become aware that the YTM curriculum only focuses on care of God's creation after they have completed their projects. If more of a focus is put into the curriculum of the first summer, then it is likely more students will develop projects related to this theme. This will result in inculcating environmental justice in many more future leaders for church and society.

From these personal histories it is clear that catechesis on the care of creation gets lost among competing catechetical priorities. The invitation to write this column has actually forced us to admit that we as catechetical leaders are at fault for neglecting catechesis on this issue. Writing this article has been transformational for both of us as we recognize our failure to connect Christian discipleship with environmental stewardship. However, more important than recognizing our failure is committing to focus more directly on environmental stewardship in the future. It is our hope that our personal conversion stories foster conversation among other catechetical leaders. We have come to realize that environmental justice will take on a higher curricular profile only if catechetical leader have a similar transformation and utilize the resources of our Catholic tradition.

Theological Foundations: Conversion and Environmental Justice

The encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* declares that the church “exists in order to evangelize” (no. 14). It goes on to say that this evangelization is characterized by “carrying forth of the Good News to every sector of the human race so that by its strength it may enter into the hearts of all and renew the human race” (no. 18). The encountering of the good news, namely Jesus Christ, is the end toward which all catechesis is aimed. This sector of the human race includes the environment. As Pope Benedict XVI declared in his general audience on August 26, 2009, “The Earth is indeed a precious gift of the Creator who, in designing its intrinsic order, has given us bearings that guide us as stewards of his creation. Precisely from within this framework, the Church considers matters concerning the environment and its protection intimately linked to the theme of integral human development.”⁶ This integral human development means that Jesus is not simply the archetype for human beings but for all of creation. He is the Word that brings life into being and gives it form. His life, death, and resurrection redeem all pieces of the universe so that all, from each particle to each mountain, sacramentally proclaim the glory of God.

When the *General Directory for Catechesis* instructs the faithful in the ways of evangelization it means to convey a conversion to Jesus Christ that extends through his person, into the hearts of believers, and into the world. The conversion experience spoken about in the GDC “involves a ‘metanoia,’ that is a profound transformation of mind and heart; it causes the believer to live that conversion.”⁷ The change that is produced through the grace encountered with Christ moves the individual to alter their life in a way that expands their love for others and in turn allows the other to be whole themselves. When an individual experiences this transformation it is shared among the community, and the community embraces the change and is itself engaged in this process of metanoia. This experience of mystagogy is the ongoing work of grace in the life of the community and the individual. It is integral into the formation of disciples and allows for the “new horizon” spoken about by Bernard Lonergan, S.J., to be one that affects the entire body of Christ.

Catechists, who hold a primary responsibility for incorporating and guiding these transformative encounters, are being asked to consider how our experience of Jesus Christ might bring us to answer the pressing needs of creation. Care of creation is integral to a relationship with God. As Pope Benedict XVI also declared, “The relationship between individuals or communities and the environment ultimately stems from their relationship with God. When man turns his back on the Creator’s plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order.”⁸ Thus a turn to the care of creation is not only a response to the signs of the times but also a traditional practice of discipleship based on the relationship between the one created and its Creator.

Pedagogy for the Care of Creation

Rather than speculate or propose how other catechetical programs in parishes or schools might develop pedagogies for the care of creation, we thought it would be most helpful to explore how we might accomplish this in our youth theology programs at Saint John’s and CTU. A key to success will be tying care of creation to Christian discipleship. Peacebuilders and YTM, as well as the thirty-five other Lilly Endowment-initiated theological programs for high school youth, have learned that it takes a holistic curriculum that includes the intellectual engagement of

6 Benedict XVI, “Safeguarding Creation,” August, 2009, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20090826_en.html.

7 Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis*, 1997, no. 55.

8 Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople on the Occasion of the Seventh Symposium of the Religion, Science and the Environment Movement, September 2007, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070901_symposium-environment_en.html.

high school youth to foster and sustain Christian discipleship. This holistic curriculum includes prayer, service, justice, community, vocational discernment, and intellectual engagement in the Christian Tradition.

Many of these youth programs utilize a foundational pedagogy of questioning to foster and sustain Christian discipleship. A Christian disciple by definition is “interested in learning” about Christ and his ways. Simply put, this pedagogy of questions engages young people in the Christian Tradition by both exploring church teaching and providing space for questions, conversation, and dialogue. Rather than limiting catechesis to information dumping or indoctrination, this catechetical approach seeks to foster and sustain Christian discipleship by encouraging ongoing inquiry through questions.

Ultimately, this catechetical approach seeks to incorporate young people into a community of Christian disciples who are using their gifts and talents to participate in Christ’s mission oriented toward the Reign of God. If the petition in the Lord’s Prayer is to be realized (“Thy kingdom come...on earth as it is in heaven”), then becoming stewards of the environment becomes an essential part of living one’s faith as a Christian disciple.

What specific steps could the youth theology programs at Saint John’s and CTU take to more effectively tie the Catholic social teaching on the care of creation to fostering and sustaining Christian discipleship?

Step 1: Make the Care of Creation a Curricular Priority.

Rather than simply mentioning this within the theological sessions focused on Catholic social teaching, this theme needs to be highlighted and made a priority. This would mean teaching young people this theme of Catholic social teaching in more depth. It would also mean providing scientific data such as that from the *IPCC Fifth Assessment Report* to the United Nations.

Step 2: Employ a Pedagogy of Questions.

Provide space for young people to raise their questions about this church teaching and about the scientific data. It also can be space for young people to ask and explore questions about the political dynamics associated with this issue. For example, John Roberts from Fox News published an article online seeking to debunk the IPCC report shortly after it was published.⁹ Engaging youth in conversation and questions about the competing political agendas in relationship to the scientific data on global warming and its implications would have to be included in the catechesis. At the core of this methodology is providing students with the freedom to explore and question. It is also important that youth are intellectually engaged in church doctrine on the care of creation. Ultimately, effective catechesis fosters conversation from multiple perspectives and invites learners to appropriate a Christian view and practice.

Step 3: Promote Service-Justice Projects Related to Environmental Stewardship.

Both Peacebuilders and YTM incorporate service-justice projects within their curricula that youth develop and lead back in their home congregations. In discussing this, we realized that over the last fifteen years of these programs, very few youth developed projects focused on the care of creation. Once again the theme became lost. Foreexample, since the year 2000, about 150 community service-justice projects have been completed by youth and their adult mentors at Saint John’s. Only about ten of these have been directly connected to the care of creation. We believe that if our curricula can more effectively engage youth in a theology of environmental stewardship, then

⁹ “UN’s Massive New Climate Report Adds Little Explanation for ‘Pause’ in Warming,” October 30, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2013/09/30/un-climate-change-models-warming/>.

many more youth will develop service justice projects related to this Catholic social teaching. This type of active learning will inculcate care for the environment deeply within the faith lives of the youth. This becomes especially influential in the faith development of young people as they take on leadership for social change and connect this to their Christian discipleship.

Step 4: Engage Parish Social Ministry Teams.

The last and perhaps most effective step in fostering social change would be to encourage the high school youth who participate in our theological programs to become engaged with their parish social ministry team. If the youth developed a project on environmental justice, they could give a presentation about their project to the parish social ministry team. Essentially they could use their *charisms* of youthful enthusiasm as leaven back in their parishes. They could perhaps then join the parish social ministry team and advocate that the parish move up on its social action agenda the issue of environmental stewardship. For those youth who come from congregations without parish social ministry teams, they could be advocates for the parish to start one. Essentially this step would be fostering and sustaining Christian discipleship on multiple levels.

Conclusion

Catechesis on environmental justice is lost within the faith formation curriculum of most congregations. It is lost within the Catholic Church for two main reasons. First, the United States Bishops have moved care of creation down significantly on the list of topics to be covered in catechetical programs, indicating that it is not currently a priority. Second, catechetical leaders themselves have not been convinced that care of creation should be a catechetical priority.

Finding or prioritizing care of creation within catechesis will first and foremost demand that it move up on the curricular agenda. Catechetical leaders need to stop ignoring global warming as one of the greatest moral issues of our time and take seriously the call of *Gaudium et Spes* to engage the “hopes, griefs, and anxieties of this age.” A conversion will be required by catechetical leaders to make this shift.

This shift will fundamentally demand theological reflection on the relationship of Christian discipleship to practices of environmental stewardship. It will be essential for Christianity to embrace environmental stewardship as a discipleship practice to remain relevant in the twenty-first century.

Finally, like Luke’s gospel story of the lost son, where the son finally comes to his senses and finds his way home, hopefully we too will come to our senses and make environmental justice a priority within catechesis. What was lost can be found!