AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARIE GEORGE

Stewardship of Creation:
What Catholics Should Know

DR. MARIE GEORGE has been a professor in the philosophy department at St. John’s University in Queens, New York, for 24 years. She has masters degrees in biology and pastoral theology, with a PhD in philosophy, and specializes in environmental ethics and science and religion. Over the past two decades, Dr. George has also been involved in religious education for the Diocese of Brooklyn. In 2009 she published the book, “Stewardship of Creation: What Catholics Should Know about Church Teaching on the Environment.”

NCRLC: Why did you write “Stewardship of Creation: What Catholics Should Know about Church Teaching and the Environment”?

MG: “Stewardship of Creation: What Catholics should know about Church teaching on the environment” began as a capstone project for a MA in Pastoral Theology at St. Joseph’s College of Maine. I chose the topic because I was familiar with looking at environmental issues from a philosophical perspective (I teach environmental ethics at St. John’s University) and because Msgr. Charles Murphy, who was a pioneer in Catholic environmentalism, graciously agreed to mentor me. When I finished the project, I asked the philosophy department secretary to proofread it. She returned it to me with a comment to the effect that she found it interesting. That gave me the idea of presenting it to a wider audience. I was familiar with the writings of various Catholic theologians on the environment, and realized that no one had yet set forth in any comprehensive way what is said in various Church documents on the topic (which is understandable, given that many are quite recent). Only two years earlier, I myself was unaware that the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church has an entire chapter on the environment (c. 10: “Safeguarding the Environment”). I felt it was time that the Catholic who desires to think with the Church be provided with an accessible presentation of what the Church actually says about environmental issues. [The book incorporates parts of over twenty Vatican, Papal, and Episcopal documents, providing concrete examples to illustrate what is being said, and has questions at the end of the chapter suitable for a discussion group.]

NCRLC: What did you hope to accomplish?

MG: A quote from the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church sums up what I was trying to accomplish: “Serious ecological problems call for an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles…” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #486). In other words, it is pretty obvious to us all that we have serious environmental problems, energy shortages, pollution, non-sustainable agriculture, toxic waste, etc. Solving those problems, however, is not simply a matter of finding some technical procedure by which to address them. It is a matter of changing our minds and hearts: we need to understand why we are responsible to care for the environment, and then assume our responsibility by making changes in the way we live our lives. The Catholic Church offers a carefully articulated rationale for why we need to be stewards of creation, one that can motivate appropriate lifestyle changes.
“He created things to serve two purposes: to testify to his wisdom and goodness and to serve the material beings created in his image, i.e., us.”
—Dr. Marie George

I find there are Catholics who have completely rejected any notion that we are to care for the environment as an overreaction to some of the ridiculous and even evil things that some environmentalists have advocated and done. (Ridiculous: in one case a town was making its inhabitants sort garbage for recycling despite the fact all the garbage ended up in the same landfill on the grounds that it was training them. Evil: advocating abortion as a way of limiting human population.) Then there are also Catholics who are indiscriminately following the lead of secular environmentalists without having any real understanding of why we as Catholics should be concerned about the environment. Church teaching offers an antidote to the misconceptions of both these groups. I feel that I’ve made a contribution when someone comes up to me after a presentation and says, “I always thought that environmentalism was a fad, but now I see why it isn’t and in what ways we need to care for the environment.”

What are some basics Catholics should know about Church teaching and the environment?

MG: The most fundamental things Catholics need to know are: first, creation is the Lord’s. He created things to serve two purposes: to testify to his wisdom and goodness and to serve the material beings created in his image, i.e., us. Secondly, he puts us in charge as stewards to foster the realization of these purposes. We thus have an obligation to maintain to the extent possible the integrity of creation by avoiding the destruction of species and ecosystems and to do what we can to insure that all of the human family is able to derive from the earth what they need for their full development. Thus, it is both a mistake to treat the earth as though it were meant solely to provide us with resources and it is a mistake to protect the environment (e.g., a given ecosystem) when doing so entails the loss of human lives (e.g., drinking water management sometimes entails the disruption of an ecosystem). Some of the lifestyle changes the Church recommends in view of best realizing creation’s two God-given purposes include: replacing consumerism and hedonism with living more simply, cultivating an appreciation of nature (including in our children), caring for the poor (poverty is one of the main causes of unnecessary environmental destruction), and seeking to change corrupt political, corporate, and other social structures that cause undue damage to the environment.

What kind of attitudes or questions do your students have concerning environmental issues?

MG: One typical question students ask is whether there really is a difference between us and other non-human animals. What at root they are wanting to know is whether our claim to being the superior life form on earth is simply wishful thinking based on self-centeredness or is there evidence that this is in fact true. Now, apes have been trained to use symbols as a means of communication. However, their failure to use these symbols to seek knowledge for its own sake shows that they lack our capacity for abstract thought. Our superiority, however, far from justifying arbitrary environmental destruction is precisely the reason why we are responsible for its care.

Many of my students are environmental studies majors and/or earth club members. They are generally engaging in environmentally friendly activities like vegetarianism, organic gardening, cycling instead of driving, etc. On the whole, they appear to realize that squandering resources means depriving other people of them. However, they generally have not reflected very much on what nature is and what is our place in nature.

Do the students know what the Catholic Church has to say about the issues?

MG: My students are philosophy students and many are non-Catholic. I suspect that like the population at large, not many of them are aware that there is Catholic Church teaching about the environment, although perhaps some know that Pope Benedict is called the “Green Pope.” I was surprised that almost half of the students were unaware of what “Fair Trade” products are. These products are of course produced in keeping with Catholic social teaching concerning workers being paid a living wage; they are often also produced in a sustainable manner which is in keeping with Catholic teaching that the earth be treated in a way that does not compromise the well-being of future generations. In Great Britain, Catholic parishes can become certified as Fair Trade parishes. We in the United States are behind in implementing this part of the Church’s social teaching.