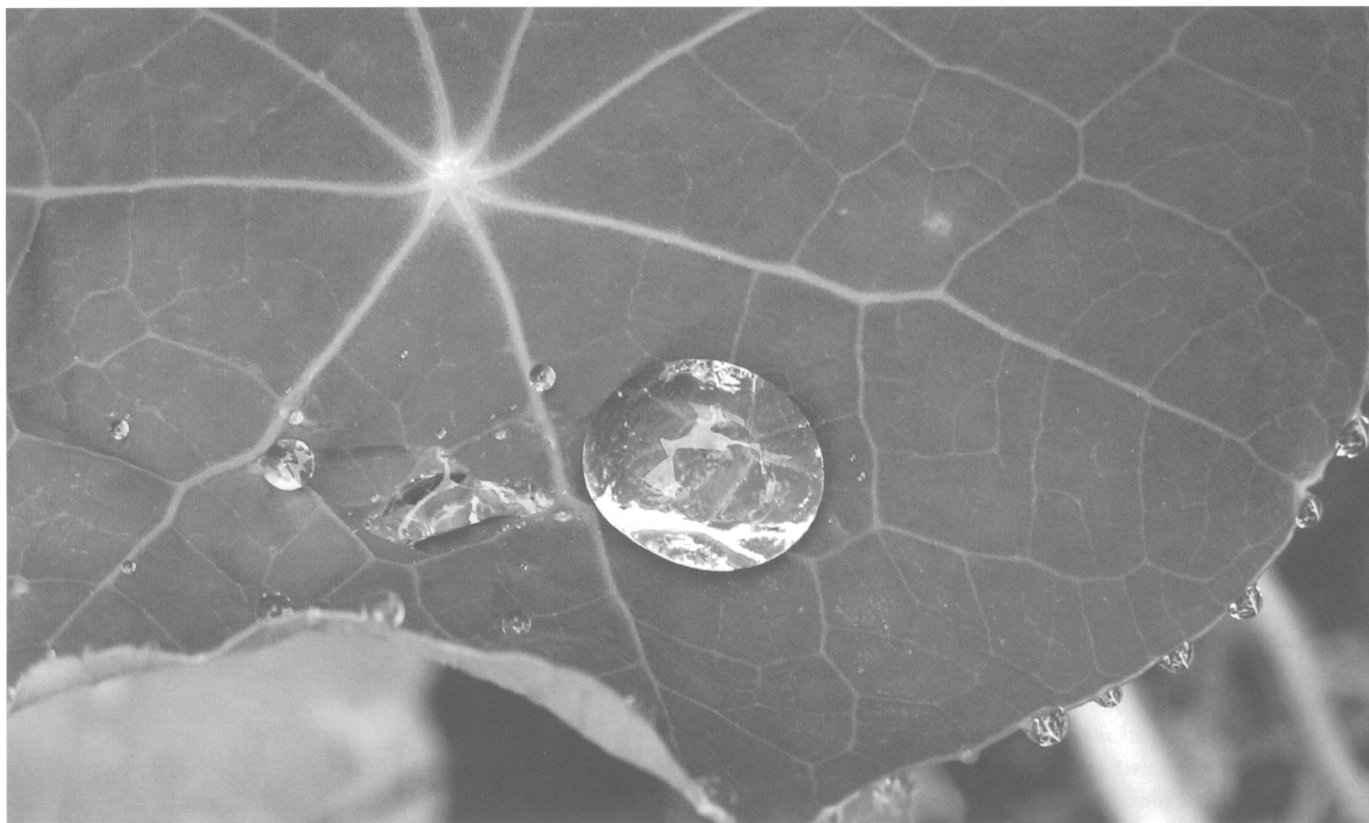


DR. BERNARD EVANS

Our Call to Care for Creation



Why should we care for creation? As a Catholic my answer would have to be in several parts. Or, I might offer one answer that reflects the Church's ongoing effort to appreciate and articulate humankind's place within creation.

Early Catholic teachings show humans having dominion over the rest of God's creation. The Vatican II document, *Church in the Modern World*, repeatedly uses dominion language with little suggestion of loving care for creation. Much of Pope John Paul II's writing on this subject also stresses dominion. But it was John Paul II who in 1990 gave us the first social document focused upon caring for creation – *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*. A year later the U.S. Catholic bishops presented their statement, *Renewing the Earth*. For Catholics, especially in the United States, these are the two social documents that put caring for creation on the table. In 1998 the bishops of this country presented the seven core themes of Catholic social teaching. Among them we find "Care for God's Creation."

The history of Catholic teaching on this subject is interesting for a couple of reasons. First, as the above suggests, our church enters this discussion a little late. Our first social document, *Rerum Novarum*, was written in 1891. It took almost one hundred years for these teachings to focus seriously upon humankind's place and responsibility within creation. A second interesting feature of Catholic teaching on caring for creation is its gradual evolution. This development moves from talking about humans having the right to dominate the earth to calling on humans to recognize the intrinsic value of the rest of creation.

Although this development can be presented in different ways, the following three stages are worth noting: (1) legacy, or asking what we are passing on to coming generations; (2) prudence, leading to caution in the face of uncertainty about how our actions will affect the earth; and (3), intrinsic value, or recognizing that creation has value apart from its usefulness for humans.

Even when past writings spoke of humans having dominion over creation, they often expressed a concern about the heritage

or **legacy** we are passing on to future generations. Christ's command to love our neighbor is universal. It means we are to love all God's children, both those near us and those in other parts of the world. The practical implication of this command to love is that we do not engage in actions or behaviors that



are harmful to our neighbor. That includes not contributing to the deterioration of land, water and other natural resources necessary for basic survival and for the functioning of human community.

This command to love, and these practical consequences that follow, apply also to future generations. Being concerned about the heritage we pass on to our grandchildren and

to their grandchildren is more than a worry about how they will judge us. This concern is a fundamental expectation that flows from our relationship with God: care for one another, especially those with greater needs, and build a world more reflective of the love and mercy, the justice and peace of God.

A second interesting development within Catholic teaching about creation is the growing emphasis upon the virtue of **prudence**. We see this especially in the U.S. Catholic bishops' statement, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*. The statement acknowledged in 2001 that there remained some debate about this issue — the extent of global warming, its causes, the human factor, expected consequences. In spite of this uncertainty, the bishops wrote, prudence should guide us to act in a cautionary manner. That is, we should “take steps now to mitigate possible negative effects in the future.”

Whether talking about global warming or any other major environmental challenge we face, the virtue of prudence should guide our response. We don't need absolute certainty that particular actions might cause harm: that concentrating thousands of hogs in one spot might threaten the local water resources; that applying ever heavier concentrations of chemicals to crops might present health risks to land, water, wildlife and

humans; that genetically modified corn might affect a neighbor's crops through pollen drift. If there is evidence that actions might cause harm to humans or the rest of creation, we should err on the side of caution. The virtue of prudence reminds us that we have no right to place at risk the well-being of our neighbors, both present and future.

A third and most interesting development in Catholic teaching on caring for creation is the movement beyond a narrow focus on humans, a shift that increasingly recognizes the **intrinsic value** of all living creatures. Many years ago Aldo Leopold wrote about a land ethic and noted that humans need to recognize our moral responsibility towards other members of the earth community. This land ethic, Leopold stated, “simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.”

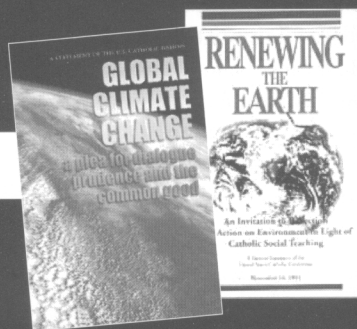
In their 1991 pastoral statement, *Renewing the Earth*, the U.S. Catholic bishops reflected upon the meaning of respect for life. They wrote about how the diversity of life manifests the glory of God. They pointed out that we must learn to see other creatures “not just as means to human fulfillment but also as God's creatures, possessing an independent value, worthy of our respect and care.” A year earlier in his World Day of Peace message, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II made the powerful statement that “respect for life and the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation.”

Creation is not all about humans. And the rest of creation is not here solely to serve our needs. As Psalm 24:1 reminds us, “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.”

So why should we care for creation? Because we and all our neighbors need it. Because it has value apart from the benefits it offers humans. Because it is good. Because it is God's. ■



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