

ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

June 4, 2015

The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Psalm.24

Today, Christians are confronted by two intertwining realities which challenge our faith. Climate change, which overwhelming evidence attributes in major part to human activity, threatens the survival of civilization, millions of human and non-human lives, and even entire island nations. The second challenge, global poverty and a growing disparity in wealth, within and among nations, undermines democratic institutions, and exacerbates and is exacerbated by the impact of environmental destruction, especially climate change.

Both these phenomena are occurring at a time of great worldwide expansion in economic activity, bringing benefits to many while driving both environmental destruction and wealth disparities. Humanity seems to be caught in a dilemma. Economic growth is believed to be the way to raise billions of the poorest people out of poverty, while the environmental destruction brought about by such growth threatens the very existence of life on earth.

We who have faith in a loving, just, faithful and merciful God, a God who sanctified creation with the Incarnation, are asking how do disciples of Jesus Christ respond to these challenges?

- First, we must pray for greater understanding of God's creation and humanity's role in it.
- We must read more deeply our sacred scripture, and study closely our Christian tradition, recognizing that changing times can provide us with new insights into both scripture and tradition.
- Then we must address the larger national and world community, bringing forward the wisdom and truth that has Christ as its source.

The traditional understanding of God's command to increase and multiply, and subdue the earth seems to be pushing God's creation toward extinction. In the Book of Genesis we read that God enjoins us to have dominion over the world and its creatures. Closer examination, in light of the present environmental crisis, of the injunction to dominate, reveals that human beings, made "in the image of God," are to act as God's representatives in creation and thus have "dominion" over the earth as would God, who called all of creation "good." The first

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humans, made out of the soil, are commanded to cultivate ('abad) it, which in the literal translation of the Hebrew term means to *serve* it.¹

Accordingly, human *dominion* over creation involves both the dependence on the earth for our sustenance, and, as God's earthly representatives, the responsibility to care for, or be in service to, God's creation.

The book of Genesis is clear that God's covenant is not limited to humanity but is also established with every living creature, indeed with the whole earth (Gen. 9:8-17).

Through the eyes of faith we can seek understanding of the complex interplay of environmental destruction, economic development, and growing wealth disparities and poverty. We can examine how they interact and what are their moral and ethical implications. Prayerfully, we must consider our complicity in the destruction of the natural world: how through our institutions, including the Church, we fail to address poverty and economic injustice in any effective way; and how we participate in the ravages wrought by a consumer driven economy. We can discern what God would have us do by turning again to scripture and our Christian tradition. As we share our insights with the larger world community, we must join with it in countering the destructive forces which humankind has let loose upon the world. Ultimately our task is to renew our covenant with God, to walk humbly with our God, grateful for all we have received at God's hands (Mic. 6:8), to live justly (Eccl. 5:8; Matt 25:40) and renew the face of God's good creation (Gen. 1:28-31; Psalm 104:1-30).

Consensus amongst 97% of climate scientists worldwide is that the greenhouse gas emissions of modern industrial economies have created chaotic disruptions in what has been a relatively stable climate for the last 15,000 years. These disruptions, including global warming, are dramatically increasing, and threaten the ability of the planet to sustain life.² The impact of human activity on the world - including climate instability, loss of habitat, massive extinctions, ocean acidification and other environmental insults - has reached such a scale that scientists have named the present epoch the Anthropocene: human dominated nature.³

1 "Excursus: Dominion or Dependence." The New Interpreter's Study Bible; New Revised Standard Version. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003. p 8.

2 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: http://report.mitigation2014.org/spm/ipcc_wg3_ar5_summary-for-policymakers_approved.pdf

3 Smithsonian Magazine: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-the-anthropocene-and-are-we-in-it-We-are-a-diverse-network-of-Christians-in-Vermont-working-together-to-serve-the-common-good-through-public-worship-and-prayer-acts-of-mercy-and-care-and-loving-prophetic-witness-for-peace-justice-and-the-integrity-of-creation>

At the same time an ideology of economic activity has been adopted by most of the nations of the earth that is driven by human wants, not human needs. This economy favors the accumulation of wealth in private hands.⁴ The ideology promotes the belief that if each person is free to act for his or her own economic good, without interference, all will eventually benefit. It assumes that competition between individuals and groups, striving to maximize their profit results in a shared benefit provided by an “invisible hand.”

Within this “free market” ideology there is scant attention paid to the notion of the “common good.” The concept of the common good is derived from the fact that humans are social beings. In Christian belief, persons, created in the image and likeness of the Triune God, are relational; we become persons through interactions with other persons. Following St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, we understand human well-being to be found in the good of the whole society, i.e. the common good.

Unfettered competition may have been reasonable at a time when earth’s human population was relatively small (although anthropologists tell us cooperation was the more prevalent behavior). However, with today’s world population of 7 billion humans expected to rise to 9 billion by 2050, dismissal of the common good in favor of individual advancement is having catastrophic consequences.

Today, with our increasing recognition of the unity and interdependence of all life, we must expand our understanding of the term “common good” to include a natural environment capable of sustaining the abundance and diversity of life on earth. Additionally we recognize the necessity of a political economy that operates within the regenerative and assimilating capacities of the natural world while providing every person with the means to live a life with dignity.

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ firmly established the relationship between people, people and God, and people and the natural world (John 1:10; 17:22-23). As Christians we understand in this three-way relationship our

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4 Inequality is Most extreme in Wealth, Not Income, New York Times, March 30, 2011 at http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/inequality-is-most-extreme-in-wealth-not-income/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0

obligation to seek justice for all (1 Cor.13:6), to love God by loving our neighbor (1 John 2:9-11; 4:9-12) and to protect the natural world which Jesus blessed by becoming human.

The failure to honor these relationships of interconnectedness, action which breaks our bond with our neighbor, with the natural world, and with God, is what we call sin. This breakdown in relationships has a social dimension. Modern, industrial societies have broken the bond with the natural world. In the pursuit of profit, many of the largest and most powerful institutions of these societies have exploited natural systems to the point that the earth can no longer assimilate the wastes produced, nor regenerate fast enough to replace what is taken. Several studies have indicated that industrial nations are consuming resources and producing wastes faster than nature can regenerate and absorb.⁵ We are living off the earth's capital with the likely result similar to what would happen if a household continued to live beyond its means. This society-wide break with the natural world has a name: "systemic sin." As Christians who benefit (in the short run) from this systemic sin, we have an obligation to change this system that not only allows, but even promotes such sin.

Those least responsible for climate change are being subjected to the greatest destruction it creates. This is where environmental destruction, including climate change becomes a traditional moral issue. Wealthy nations, mostly in the Northern Hemisphere, are the greatest producers of carbon and methane, two of the major greenhouse gases that are warming the earth and bringing about destructive climate change. Yet people, primarily in the Global South, amongst the poorest people on earth, are enduring the greatest destruction and death caused by climate change. Unlike their rich northern neighbors, these nations do not have the resources to mitigate the effects of climate change, nor can they adapt to the new circumstances such change imposes. The accompanying extinction of scores of thousands of species of animals and plants is now recognized as ecological sin and carries its own moral condemnation.

We recognize that climate justice, like economic justice, must be the concern of Christians, indeed of all people. We can build a world where the fruits of human labor and the riches of the earth are shared more equitably,

⁵ ["Overconsumption? Our Use of the World's Natural Resources," Friends of the Earth Austria, Sustainable Europe Research Institute. Sept. 2009 at http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/overconsumption.pdf](http://www.foe.co.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/overconsumption.pdf); Report: Consumption of Earth's resources Unsustainable, CBS News, May 12, 2012 at <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/report-consumption-of-earths-resources-unsustainable/>; Living Planet Report 2012, World Wildlife Fund at http://awsassets.panda.org/downloads/lpr_2012_summary_booklet_final.pdf



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where each person has enough to reach their potential without destroying the biological foundations of all life on earth. Climate change and economic injustice are human made; we can undo what we have done and move in a more just and ecologically sound direction. It is our choice: if we choose to turn from our present path of destruction for ourselves and all the earth, we can find a way, as promised by Jesus, to have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10). May we choose the way of life.

This statement was written by The Peace, Justice, and the Integrity of Creation Committee of the Vermont Ecumenical Council and Bible Society and approved by the Board of Trustees on June 4, 2015.

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