

Topic: Church and Ecology
Convenor: Joseph Bracken, Xavier University, Cincinnati
Presenters: Walter Grazer, U.S. Catholic Conference
Joseph Bracken, Xavier University
Deborah Blake, Regis University

Walter Grazer, Director of the Environmental Justice Program for the U.S. Catholic Conference, made clear in his remarks the need of the hierarchy for the assistance of theologians in dealing with four interrelated environmental issues: development of an appropriate Christian spirituality to foster environmental awareness; a better relationship between science and religion; better understanding of the place of the human person in the natural world; a closer connection between social and environmental justice. With reference to the first issue, Grazer noted that many of those with environmental concerns are looking for an underlying spirituality as motivation for their work but do not find such a spirituality at hand in institutional religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). As a result, they have turned to eastern religions or "nature worship" for guidance and inspiration. Secondly, he called attention to the way in which science itself has become a quasi-religion for many contemporary human beings even though more reflective scientists recognize the need for dialogue with church people about the religious and moral implications of their discoveries and inventions. Thirdly, a balance must be found between the recognition of the interdependence of human beings with the rest of creation and their traditional placement at the pinnacle of creation. Finally, the notion of the common good within Catholic social teaching must be expanded beyond the common good for the human community to the good of the created order, even as one continues to defend the rights of individuals to a just and sustainable lifestyle.

In implicit response to the last issue, Joseph Bracken presented a brief overview of the decline of the Thomistic teleological worldview at the beginning of the modern era in virtue of widespread disagreement about the alleged plan of God for creation; the new focus on individual human rights in the philosophies of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant with a corresponding neglect of the issue of the universal or common good; and in the contemporary era the gradual recognition of the need for a genuinely relational ontology as theoretical undergirding for environmental concerns. To make clear the differences between classical liberal ontology as grounded in individual human rights and a new relational ontology based on the notion of the interdependence of all finite entities within the overall ecosystem of this world, Bracken drew attention to a recent book by Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Toward a Politics of Relationality* (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1998). Therein the author uses the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead to justify the expanded role of government in fostering the common good as well as in protecting individual rights; in enhancing the quality of life for natural communities (e.g., entire ecosystems) as well as strictly human

communities; finally, in empowering individuals to live a more fully human life in collaboration with others rather than simply being guaranteed freedom from external interference in the exercise of purely political rights in total abstraction from any concrete economic or social context.

Deborah Blake used her place on the program to give a case study of a small, Hispanic, Catholic community in Southern Colorado which found itself the victim of corporate business interests in the progressive degradation of the regional watershed on which they depended for their economic and social well-being. In response, the community mobilized to save "land, water and way of life in the heart of the Southwest." But that response was largely shaped in virtue of their self-identity as a religious community consciously acting in the light of Gospel values rather than simply functioning as a "bit player" in the ongoing power struggle between environmentalists and big business within contemporary life in the United States. Blake thus concluded: "a fundamental kerygmatic theology is antecedent to any theology of the environment." That is, the religious tradition of the community with its emphasis on liturgy and sacraments and with its "everyday theology and spirituality" is a better starting point for dealing with pressing environmental issues than "abstract, decontextualized theological categories or theology according to crisis topics."

In the spirited discussion that followed, emphasis was laid on a "spirituality of place" as the necessary context for an environmental theology; on the need to engage the religious imagination of Catholics to inspire an ecological worldview; on the need to rethink the *imago Dei* tradition in terms of creation as a whole rather than as focused on the individual human being or even the human community. In conclusion, it was agreed that further sessions on theology/spirituality and ecology should be organized in future years at the CTSA convention.

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