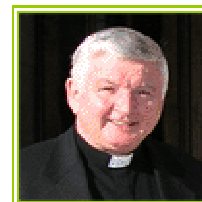


Saving the Planet ... A Christian response?

By Fr Michael Scanlon



“When I see the heavens, the work of your Hand
the moon and stars which you arranged
what is man that You should keep him in mind
mortal man that You should care for him?”

Yet You made him little less than a god
with honour and glory You crowned him
gave him power over the works of Your hands
put all things under his feet.

All of them sheep and cattle
yes even the savage beasts
birds of the air and fish
that make their way through the waters”.

How great is Your name O Lord our God. Psalm 8

The earth and its fullness, fruitfulness, its beauty and sometimes its savagery have been given to us so that we can become good stewards of all as given. We have been called to make the earth serve us, to be at our disposal, but for a purpose. We were called to make it bear fruit, to multiply its resources and to use it wisely.

We have NOT been called to exploit, destroy or make it increasingly unsustainable. To ensure sustainability, we only need to be creative in its use. It is possible for us to eat, build be innovative and perhaps even industrialise and still be able protect the earth and guarantee its maximum resources for our use. To do so we need to understand its workings; how best to reap its “rich harvest” and yields for our nourishment and for our enjoyment of its beauty and loveliness.

Our planet is one of many in the cosmos and it has been endowed with enormous resources and advantages.

Within our planet and solar system we have patterns of nature that ensure a variety of weather patterns, climate, vegetation type and degrees of riches of what can be utilised by man; means to heat, make things and heal. The extent of this is only slowly becoming evident as we start to deplete the more obvious means of “survival”. Within our green and luscious earth are many resources with a value that we simply have not discovered or are not willing to use; instead we rush for more obvious, cheaper and financially exploitable. How many thousand more would have died had Sir Alexander Fleming not discovered that “mould” can save lives. The discovery of Penicillin, or of Foxglove, Digitalis, as a great means of supporting the heart, or the knowledge of rotating crops to enable a better non exploitable means of growing things and replenishing the soil, or indeed the use of animals not just for consumption but also for carriage, means of transport and assistance (guide

dogs, comfort, etc.) every part of nature has a specific use even if we are not always aware of it.

Protecting and using the earth wisely is clearly a call of every Christian. It is an earth we share with each other and with all that grows in and within it. As man has become more technologically advanced and more aware of the earth's potentials, instead of taking maximum advantages man appears to be in real dilemma on how to best use the sparsely or unevenly distributed resources to feed, satisfy and equitably share with the now growing population on the planet.

This process has revealed, in a very particular way, the greed and exploitive nature of Man. Questions such as "how can this or that best be used for mankind in general are often replaced by... how much material benefit can I or my country make use of this or that resource for our benefit and not the benefit of all".

Simultaneously the issue of potential scarcity and the effects of overuse do not enter into the affray. A good example here is the cutting down, without replacement of tress and large chunks of forest, without the realisation of the effects that this has on climate. The essential balance of nature is affected by our need of wealth, but forgetting the basic exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide (Carbon Cycle). The dramatic climatic effects of these imbalances are being experienced worldwide. They are accelerating beyond our understanding and arguably, if recent events are to be gone by, beyond our control. We do not truly comprehend the piercing of the ozone layer which protects our earth and climate.

Take the tragic tsunami tragedy in South East Asia just a few years ago where hundreds of thousands of people perished and properties worth billions destroyed. These communities have been effectively destroyed for generations. Australia is facing the pre-Christmas summer 2011 as the coldest in 50 years, what irony! In the Philippines, nearly 1,000 people are reported dead with the number likely to rise as a result of a vicious typhoon.

Further, no less important is the threat to our fauna and the loss of certain species as well as the overfishing of our seas which has a similar effect. Yet at a recently concluded Climate Change Conference in Durban, South Africa every indication is that even the countries with the largest population, those with the largest amount of wealth and those with ever increasing political and financial influence are yet to fully appreciate the collective responsibility we all have for this planet earth, as granted for our stewardship by God.

The sea levels are expected to rise, ice is turning into water in the north most pole, draught and famine in unprecedented scale is reported in areas like the Horn of Africa and East Africa, mainly Kenya and Somalia. Fresh water is in the decline and could be a source for future conflicts and wars, disease like malaria could become a reality in the global North (Europe and North America) as a result of longer dry weather. Unless urgent action is taken it is estimated. for instance, that it could cost British households up to 4% of its annual income as a result, a global average of 5 to 20%. Why wait!

Clearly the earth has undergone major climatic changes in the past with ice ages and heat but the effects of the changes in weather patterns which we are experiencing speak more of an accelerated phenomena which are not only measurable but have a profound effect on

the very resources we are trying to improve, mainly increase in the food supply where the most urgent challenge is to equitably match and feed the rising population. On the one hand we “modify crops artificially” to yield more, and some quibble, but counterbalance this with excess behaviour that has an effect on weather patterns that destroy the same crops. The typhoon in the Philippines left absolutely nothing behind its track. We try to enrich food and feed ourselves food that produces abnormalities in the food we eat (Mad cow disease through feeding cattle meat).

The imperative to feed all the peoples of the world, which should be a priority, often gives way to satisfying the need of those countries already surrounded by plenty – the poor countries are exploited by the insistence of growing the goods needed by the affluent. Single crop economies lead to crisis after crisis if the crops fail, with little consideration for the welfare of the producers of the same. Little regard is made for long term creative use of land in the countries with the greatest need of a variety of crops to feed their growing but often malnourished populace.

Imbalance after imbalance thus has a devastating effect on resources and its distribution.

This also applies to non edible goods and national resources, such as oil, that become sources of enmity and power between nations and lead, not only to exploitation by the rich of the poor, but a bargaining tool and power play which in turn endangers peace on the planet.

For a Christian there are many dilemmas and it can become an overwhelming issue, with mind blowing complexities of theories, agreements and disagreements, of professional agendas based on power. But the bare truth remains that we are meant to be stewards and responsible in our use of the gifts that have been given to us. In our own way we can all play a part in this stewardship. Indeed it is also linked with issues of living both simply and with more than a mere token gesture the virtue of “poverty” – of not having more than we need and being willing to be generous and sharing what we have. A good example here is to be conscientious about recycling of used goods, being attentive to what we throw away. Charity shops have played a part in our perception in our reusing of clothes and household goods and there are many such initiatives that not only “reuse, restore and recycle” but gain funds for further charitable endeavours. We can all play a part in this. There is also the issue of the way we use food and share it – not wasting any food and not eating more than we need. Donating to poorer people on our door step and internationally.

We could all ask ourselves the following questions

- ❖ Do I have more than I need and could some of it be used by someone else?
- ❖ Am I careful about reusing things and not merely buying out of laziness or social pressure
- ❖ Do I care about the exploitation of poorer peoples and their poverty?
- ❖ Do I remain informed about the things that damage our earth and try to protect it?
- ❖ Do I pray for those whose task it is to protect nature and govern wisely?
- ❖ Do I ask myself – if something “new” is necessary or ethical, desirable, will it have consequences for others – is something proposed sustainable or is it a “one off” wonder which is a “quick fix” but not truly beneficial for all mankind?

- ❖ Is something just and fair to many people?
- ❖ Is it shareable, with many being able to benefit from it?

These are the issues that confront us to which we must answer honestly. Finally we must also be careful not to make of this issue an aim in itself. We can be guilty of making “The Environment” into a kind of religion forgetting that it is God we worship and we must be stewards, caretakers and users of the gifts of the earth. However man has the primacy over nature and he is made in the image and the likeness of God. To worship nature is an error, pantheism, and the line has to be carefully drawn as Jesus said

“Look how the wild flowers grow, they don’t work or make clothes for themselves, but I tell you that even King Solomon with all his wealth had clothes as beautiful as one of these flowers. It is God who clothes the wild grass – grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, burnt up in the oven. Won’t he be all the more sure to clothe you? How little faith you have!

So don’t be all upset, always concerned about what you eat and drink. For the pagans of this world are always concerned about all these things. Your Father knows that you need these things. Instead, be concerned with His Kingdom and He will provide you with these things. Luke 12 vs. 27-31

As recently as October, on his visit to Germany, the Holy Father drew our attention to perhaps, our overzealous concern with nature forgetting man with these words:

“Young people have come to realise that something is wrong in our relationship with nature, that matter is not just raw material for us to shape at all, but that earth has a dignity of its own that we must follow its directives –

The importance of ecology is no longer disputed. We must listen to the language of nature and must answer accordingly. Yet I would like to underline a point that seems to me to be neglected today as in the past; there is ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that cannot be manipulated at will. Man is not merely self creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature”.

What is our response?

(Fr Michael Scanlon – December 2011)