

STATIO CONFERENCE – OCTOBER

STEWARDSHIP

APPRECIATION OF THE BEAUTY AND GOODNESS OF CREATION AS SACRAMENT OF GOD

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Introduction

In his book *The Art of Passing over*, Francis Dorff, tells this story.

There was an Irish Parish priest who would hitch up his horse and buggy each week and visit the members of his little church. For the most part, he used to enjoy the ride and the beauty of the countryside – that is, except for the sight of one field. It was deserted, abandoned, full of rocks and brambles, with a broken down fence. It was so ugly, the priest could hardly stand the sight of it.

Then one day, a young man moved into the area and bought the field. Little by little, he cleared away the brambles and the rocks. He used the rocks to build a sturdy wall and replaced the old, broken fence with a brand new one which he made himself. Then he planted a small garden and began to care for it.

The parish priest was delighted to see how much the field had changed. He actually looked forward to seeing it now as he made his weekly rounds. One day, as he passed by, the priest saw the young man out working in the field. He stopped and went over to talk to him.

“Michael,” he called out, “may I have a word with you?”

The young man stopped his work and came over to greet the priest.

“Michael,” the priest said, “I just want to tell you that this field is a delight to my heart. You and God are doing a fine job with it.”

“Thank you kindly, Father”, the young man replied. “You should have seen it when God was doing it all by himself!” (p. 120)

Co-Creator and Stewards of God’s Creation

In the story we see how God is inviting us to be his active co-worker in creating the world. When did God first call us to be Stewards?

In the beginning . . .

God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth... Genesis 1:1-

This chapter in Genesis, describes God as creator of the whole universe, a process in which humans are invited to participate as co-creators and stewards of God’s creation and respectfully care for God’s gifts, which are to be shared by all.

In Genesis chap. 2, we read: *“The Lord God formed man, from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it...The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field.”*

This Yahwist creation story in Genesis 2, portrays a more personal and immanent God who walks in the garden of Eden. In this story, both humans and animals are made from the dust of the earth. And just as God breathes the “breath of life” into the man, it is noted in (Gen7:22) that all living creatures had the breath of life. So, the animals are our kin. We have a shared nature.

Humans are co-creators with God through our naming of the animals. And man is not charged to “subdue” creation, but “to till it and keep it.” The Hebrew words are “abad” to serve, which can even mean “bonded service” but is translated to till; and “shamar” to preserve and even to protect, but is translated to keep.

Being dependent on subsistence agriculture for survival, the Yahwist had a humble awareness of humanity’s place in nature and role in tilling and keeping God’s very good earth. It presents a theology of dependence in contrast to a theology of dominion (Theodore Hiebert).

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In the biblical context, stewardship refers to humankind’s responsibility for carefully husbanding God’s gifts. (Gen1:26) God says “let us make humankind in our image and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air and cattle and over all the wild animals, and over the creeping things that creep upon the earth.” This role is further clarified in Genesis 2:15: “the Lord God took the earth creature and put it in the Garden of Eden *to till it and keep it.*”

The term “stewardship” has evolved since its early biblical use. Today both the business and academic communities use it to refer to our relationship to natural resources. Currently the concern for stewardship of human resources is found primarily in the field of leadership, where it implies a willingness to serve rather than to control others and to be accountable for the wellbeing of the larger organization, stewardship is to hold something in trust for another. Stewards are charged to promote the good through conservation and through change. As God’s stewards, we likewise must both preserve and change.

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Stewardship is a way of life, a conversion of heart, an expression of love. Stewards know the meaning of life and make real sacrifices to make the world a better place, in the process also make their own lives better.

Stewardship does not mean giving generous gifts from our possessions. Stewardship is recognizing that we have been entrusted with the goods of the earth, yet own nothing. We make resources we do not need available to others. Stewardship requires us to find ways in which we can collaborate with others to make the resources in our possession work for the good of all as intended by God. In other words, the resources at our disposal should help us “to till the earth and keep it”.

Nonetheless, each of us has opportunities and resources at our disposal that others do not have. At the Priory House Ext., I always appreciate our once-a-year community practice of “sharing a meal”

with Tuluyan homeless families. More than the food, we give the homeless our company and the gift of our presence which otherwise they may not have. In the process, we learn to appreciate what the lives of the poor contribute to our own salvation (cf. Lk. 14:14). And for us, who are in the field, this community gesture is an encouragement and a reminder that we are not alone in this task. The same can be said with every Yolanda victim whose home we helped to build/ repair or when we shell out cash for work to help people rise from the rubble.

Another experience at the shelter illustrates to a certain extent a principle of Christian stewardship. We met Rosalinda, 54, in one of our visits to the Baywalk area where many homeless people spend the night. She came to the shelter and joined batch 4 of Tuluyan semi-residents. She lived in the shelter long enough for us to know her better. She used to be married to a German national, later got divorced. She then returned to the Philippines and ventured into different businesses that often went bankrupt, penniless, she took to the streets. At the shelter, she offered her services and tended our garden. After finishing all the modular courses/ formation sessions offered at the shelter, she was ready to go into food vending and selling cookies and chocolates. She was doing well until one day she hurriedly decided to return home to Mindoro her home province, after diagnosis of advanced stage of lung TB. In our last talk before parting, she said: "Thank you Sister. You have given me more than anyone has ever given me in my life. You have given me back my dignity as a person." She said she wanted to sell a small property in the province and come back for lung surgery. She never made it.

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It doesn't take much reflection to be awe-inspired by a sunset on the beach or a clear night sky in the mountains. We can appreciate the beauty and intricacy of nature without much analysis. One might say that nature 'speaks' to us in a language we recognize, that we can connect with nature without much effort because we are also a part of it.

We experience creation in a way that moves beyond simply an appreciation for beauty or fascination. We experience God in creation. Literally, we see the mark, the "footprint" of God, the Creator imprinted in creation itself, but more so – creation points us beyond itself back to God. Creation is like a mirror that reflects God back to us. Our response hence is: Love God as creator. There are three main components in creation stewardship:

1. Awareness (seeing, identifying, naming, locating).

At a time when so much cares and issues e.g., foreign affairs, local politics, jobs, or traffic - crowd our attention, much of creation in its natural aspect comes unreal and obscure. We need to take conscious effort to make ourselves aware of what is happening in God's creation. Our ultimate purpose is to honour God as creator in such a way that environmental stewardship is part and parcel of everything we do.

2. Appreciation (tolerating, respecting, valuing, esteeming, cherishing).

From awareness comes appreciation; we appreciate better that which we are aware of. We may tolerate butterflies and horses, for example, and in so doing appreciate them. Beyond toleration, appreciation also means respect. We certainly respect a large cow, but we also can develop respect for a lowly worm as we learn of its critical importance to the rest of creation (including ourselves). Appreciation can build from tolerating, to respecting, to valuing. We know that God declares creation to

be good, and God does so for good reason. As we become aware of what we discover we will even esteem and cherish. Thus, awareness will lead to appreciation.

3. Stewardship (using, restoring, serving, keeping, entrusting).

Appreciation leads to stewardship. At first stewardship may mean the use of creation; But stewardship will bring us well beyond use, to restoration of what has been abused in the past. The widespread lack of awareness and ignorance of integrity of creation means that we and many others knowingly or unknowingly have abused and degraded the environment, and stewardship means that we will work to set things right again – to reconcile and redeem.

Beyond restoration, stewardship means serving. God through creation is in so many ways serving our own lives. We will return this service with our own. This service will include a loving and caring keeping of what we hold in trust. And, our service in creation will ultimately even involve our entrusting others with what we have served, kept, and restored.

Environmental Stewardship

Terrence Kardong, a known RB scholar, has noted that, "a casual reading of the Rule of Benedict indicates little or nothing of ecological interest." But from an in-depth reading, Abbot Klassen presents three themes that can provide an ethical foundation for thinking about environmental stewardship: humility, stability and frugality

Humility

RB 7:10-11 reads: "The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the fear of God always before his eyes and never forgets it." Someone who has experienced the living God knows first hand that God is God and that he or she, a human being is not. The Christian name for this new awareness, that God is God, and I am not, is **humility**. It is humility which allows us to acknowledge that we are not the creators of the universe, but creatures. It is humility which allows us to recognize that all life, human, botanical and zoological, comes *adamah*, "out of the ground." We are one with the soil, with the plants and animals, all of whom "fear God" by their very existence. The human choice is to live within the constraints of creaturehood.

It is precisely humility which is a necessary corrective to the arrogance and acquisitiveness that has led to our increasing alienation from nature. Some theologians, such as James A. Nash, introduced the idea of "ecological sin," defined in part as, "*the arrogant denial of the creaturely limitations imposed on human ingenuity and technology, a defiant disrespect or a deficient respect for the interdependent relationships of all creatures and their environments established in the covenant of creation, and an anthropocentric abuse of what God has made for frugal use.*"

Stability

The vow of stability is an excellent foundation for environmental stewardship. By analogy, exploring, studying, seeing the place where one lives as a monastic will lead to a deep knowledge and love for the local environment and will ground one in a place. Kardong has suggested the following axiom: "Those who live in a place have the biggest stake in it." Of course, there are examples of communities who have destroyed their own local habitat. In the first ten thousand years of agriculture, over-grazing was one of the single most damaging practices that caused large tracts of land to be badly eroded or converted into desert. Human ignorance can wreak havoc in any situation, and local greed is as bad as any other greed.

The earth teaches us about the whole transition from birth to death. As Ernest Becker and a host of other writers have noted, to acknowledge the reality of death re-orient the meaning of human life. Life is a gift, a given span of days, seventy years or eighty for those who are strong. Analogously, monastic places are also a gift, to be received with joy and care, to be a part of for a while, but then to be handed on to the next generation. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Gary Snyder, a known poet in the mid-1970's records the words of a Crow elder: "You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough the spirits will begin to speak to them."

Benedictine monastics want to be people who "stay in a place long enough that the spirits can influence us." By coming to know a place deeply, the set of overlapping ecosystems, the delicate balance which exists between the number of creatures and available nourishment, the patterns that play themselves out year after year, monastic communities will make decisions with an understanding of their consequences.

Environmental knowledge will lead us to recognize the habitats that are necessary for different kinds of wildlife. It will draw us to learn something about the forest that was originally in a place, to review topography and soil and climate conditions, and reforest if necessary. Nature itself has much to teach about human limits, the seasons of a person's life, the cycle of death and renewal and will be part of the educational process.

Finally, we will pray differently. The psalms and the scriptures are loaded with imagery from the natural world, which is activated in a fresh and powerful way by first-hand knowledge of the environment in which we live. We will come to know ourselves as part of the created world, and not in opposition to it.

Frugality: The Consumption Ethic

After World War I, Victor Lebow, an American retailing analyst proclaimed, "*Our enormously productive economy ...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate.*" Americans have responded to Mr. Lebow's call and today the United States is the largest consuming nation in the world. Much of the world has followed. Our consumer culture has long-term grave environmental consequences.

Already, the effects of environmental degradation surround us: the smog in our cities; chemicals in our water and on our food; eroded topsoil blowing in the wind; the loss of valuable wetlands; radioactive and toxic waste lacking adequate disposal sites; threats to the health of industrial and farm workers. The problems, however, reach far beyond our own neighborhoods and work-places. Our problems are the world's problems and burdens for generations to come. Poisoned water crosses borders freely. Acid rain pours on countries that do not create it. Greenhouse gases and chlorofluorocarbons affect the earth's atmosphere for many decades, regardless of where they are produced or used.

We have only one planet. Its capacity to support a thriving diversity of species, humans included, is limited. There is an erosion of the health of the Earth's living systems.

In the face of this stark reality, the Benedictine virtue of frugality offers us an alternative vision of sustainable consumption--based not on want but on essential need. RB is permeated with direct and indirect references to frugality. Benedict writes, "Frugality should be the rule on all occasions. For example, the fundamental principal of the community of goods is positively stated in chapter 34: It was distributed to each one according to need." Benedict continues further, "So the one who needs less should thank God and not be sad. And whoever needs more should be humble about his weaknesses and not gloat over the mercy shown him." (34:1, 3) Benedict includes it in the teaching on private property, the distribution of goods according to need and the appropriate use of food and drink.

Why does Benedict establish this system? First he wants to combat avarice, that desire which can never get enough of the world's goods. When avarice is operating it is very difficult to distinguish "needs" and "wants." The second reason is more positive -- he wants peace among the members. This is not merely a psychological phenomenon but a genuine peace because each person has what he or she needs to live, the satisfaction of legitimate needs. When we hear the Rule read as monastics every night at supper, we hear that as a call to ourselves, to what we should aspire to.

Frugality has in recent years received renewed attention by theologians and those concerned with environmental conditions. James Nash, for example, names frugality as one of the nine "ecological virtues" of which sustainability is the first. On frugality Nash writes: "Frugality connotes thrift, moderation, efficiency, simplicity of life-style, and stringent conservation. It thrives on the control of consumption, the reduction of waste, and comprehensive recycling. It is the key to sustainability." Frugality is an excellent contribution we Benedictines can make to our wasteful, over-consuming society.

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Thomas Berry, a priest of the Passionist order and one of the leading voices in "eco-spirituality", said: "There is now a single issue before us: survival. Not merely physical survival, but survival in a world of fulfilment, survival in a living world, where the violets bloom in the springtime, where the stars shine down in all their mystery, survival in a world of meaning."

Eco-spirituality claims that there is a spiritual dimension to our present ecological crisis. It has long been understood by indigenous peoples that our relationship to the Earth is spiritually as well as physically sustaining. For indigenous peoples this is often included in their way of life, and expressed through their rituals and prayers.

From the eco-spiritual perspective, God or the Divine, is not just the source of creation but is very much also a part of creation; a part with which we can interact on a daily basis through our senses and from such experiences gain greater insight into the wonder of reality.

On a personal level, this inherent sacredness of nature generally leads to a spiritually motivated engagement in the current environmental crises of our planet and a dedication to the justice and long view of a sustainable prosperity for all.

The expression of an ecological concern indirectly calls for an eco-spiritual approach towards the entire creation. John Paul II highlighted this in his 1990 World Day of Peace Message: "Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that humans cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as they have done in the past."

It is not enough being aware of the Ecological crisis in our society. As part of the Eco-system, we have the responsibility to take care of creation with love and concern. We need to change the way we perceive the world. We must cease treating our planet in a selfish, godless manner precisely because we fail to see it as a gift inherited from above; The natural environment – the forest, water and land – belongs to all generations; it is our obligation to receive, respect and return this gift to future generations. Therefore, we must change the way we regard the world. We require “a new heavenly” worldview if we are to desire “a new earth.” (Rev. 21.1)

A Call to Reflection and Action

- In the face of the deteriorating condition of the natural world, how have we as good stewards, responded to this invitation to care for God's creation in your everyday life?
- What can we as religious community offer to the environmental movement, and what can we learn from it?
- As Benedictines, where are the challenges to frugality?

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Closing Prayer

*O God, we thank you for this earth, our home;
for the wide sky and the blessed sun,
for the salt sea and the running water,
for the everlasting hills and the never-resting winds,
for trees and the common grass underfoot.
We thank you for our senses
By which we hear the songs of birds
and see the splendour of the summer fields.*

Grant us a heart wide open to all this beauty;

*and save our souls from being so blind that we pass unseeing
when even the common thorn bush is aflame with your glory,
O God, our creator, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.*

—Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918)