



Despoiler or Problem-solver

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Parishes are introducing environmental concerns into Sunday liturgies, a practice that reflects a growing social awareness of issues like endangered species and the quality of air and water. Raising these concerns in prayer doesn't necessarily conflict with Catholic teaching.

We need to be aware, however, of the movement that proposes a full "greening" of Liturgy and theology. It represents a direct threat to traditional belief. And if priests and parishioners aren't careful, they could find themselves unwitting participants.

Consider the "confession" of environmental sins offered by the National Council of Churches (NCC): "We are responsible for massive pollution of earth, water and sky. ...We are killing the skies: as the global atmosphere heats up from chemical gases, as the ozone layer is destroyed."

Scientists say most of these concerns are overblown. But let's just say these assertions are true. At most, they are technical matters to be addressed by specialists in the public or private sector. They shouldn't have far-reaching spiritual relevance. No one is in Hell for using aerosol hairspray.

Only if we jettison traditional teachings can we agree with the words of NCC's eco-celebrant, who says in one proposed prayer: "We must say, do, and be everything possible to realize the goal of the Environmental Sabbath. ... We cannot let our mother die. We must love and replenish her."

Describing the earth as our living mother either constitutes a pagan form of earth worship or comes dangerously close. An "Environmental Sabbath" isn't a Christian goal, even though the United Nations has a program to promote it. Neither should we attempt to create an "Eco-Church," as author Albert Fritsch asserts in a book by that name.

The Genesis account of creation provides enough theological evidence to counter the greening of theology. After God created man and woman in His image, He said: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish and the sea, the birds of the air and all the living things that move on this earth" (Gn 1:28).

The earth hasn't been given dominion over people. We have souls which are in need of salvation; rocks, rivers, squirrels and salmon do not. We have been given the gifts of reason and revelation; plants and animals have not. There are right and wrong ways to have dominion over nature, which the well-formed conscience can discern. Importing secular environmentalist political ideology only confuses the issue.

Unfortunately, Catholics aren't immune from such politico-secular influences. The U.S. Catholic Conference -- the policy arm of the American bishops -- has prepared "A Resource for Parishes" entitled "Renewing the Face of the Earth." It suggests this Penitential Litany: "How many waters must we pollute? How many forests must we destroy? How much soil must we erode and poison, O Lord? How many species must we abuse and extinguish?" And so on.

If readers miss the political message, they can turn to the back of the monograph. The conference lists groups to contact, including Greenpeace, USA; the World Resources Institute; and the AFL-CIO. You may or may not support the politics of these groups, but sending them money or granting them moral support doesn't necessarily advance the faith. The goals of these groups -- which include a heavily regulated economy and an encumbered system of enterprise -- should be evaluated without a theological gloss.

The American bishops shouldn't give their moral weight to a movement which seems to view human beings as a earth's most undesirable part of creation. The real fault of the bishops' monograph is that it promotes the view of the person as a despoiler and not as the problem-solver of environmental troubles.

At a time when holy days of obligation are routinely forgotten, the US Catholic Conference suggests we recognize "Earth Day" as a "Day of Prayer and Celebration." As the news media clarified, Earth Day has no spiritual agenda if not to promote a pagan-like earth worship.

G.K. Chesterton discusses this temptation in his biography of St. Francis of Assisi. The pagans, unlike St. Francis, worshipped nature itself. "The wisest men in the world set out to be natural," Chesterton noted of the Greeks, "and the most unnatural thing in the world was the very first thing they did. The immediate effect of saluting the sun and the sunny sanity of nature was a perversion spreading like a pestilence. The greatest and even the purest philosophers could not apparently avoid this low sort of lunacy."

Christianity rescued the world from this lunacy. Today, Christian Churches may be in need of rescue.

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