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## Don't use environmental spirituality to halt prosperity

Dangerous strains of environmentalism have made inroads into the traditional religious view of mankind's domination over nature

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**E**nvironmental thought is being used increasingly, not to preserve nature's beauty, but to restrict economic prosperity. As a priest, I am concerned about this movement, not only because I believe that economic development is good for the human family but also because, under the guise of environmentalism, certain heresies are making in-roads into our houses of worship. Of late, we have witnessed the rise of what some have called a "green spirituality," said to blend nicely with traditional faith.

To be sure, there are aspects of religious environmental ethics that do express the traditional positive view of the created order articulated by the church throughout the centuries. Christianity teaches that the earth is the Lord's because it is His creation, and we are called to look upon the glories and beauties of creation as prime examples of God's hand at work in the cosmos. Further, the scriptures call the human family to have a profound respect for that creation and not to squander resources that are entrusted to us for our use but, rather, to employ them wisely.

Let us insist, however, upon some elementary distinctions. Looking upon nature as a lens through which we see God's hand as author of creation is not the same as finding

God Himself present exclusively in nature, much less substituting nature for God. Moreover, having respect for God's created order does not mean that it must not be used for the benefit of humankind; rather, a belief in the sanctity of life requires that we accept our responsibilities to have stewardly dominion over nature. That such statements are considered contestable is a troubling sign of how far certain dangerous strains of environmentalism have made inroads into traditional communities of faith.

In "Earth in the Balance," widely praised as the consummate statement of the new environmentalism, former Vice President Al Gore admitted that "the more deeply I search for the roots of the global environmental crisis, the more I am convinced that it is an outer manifestation of an inner crisis that is, for lack of a better word, spiritual." On its face, such is not wholly objectionable - Pope John Paul II has at times said as much, but has said it better -but Gore is asking us to reassess our spiritual place in the universe by renewing "a connection" not to God and not to other people, but to the "natural world."

Such a view comes close to suggesting that the life of nature is more precious than that of human beings. It denigrates the status of human life; further, it likely would lead to a massive curbing of production, economic exchange and innovation. In truth, we know from

history and from Christian teaching that man's survival and thriving depend on exercising responsible dominion over the world, cultivating creation, owning property, and transforming it to the betterment of the human condition, always with an eye toward doing God's will.

In secular times such as ours, perhaps it is not surprising that strange theories that hearken back to the errors of the early Christian centuries would come into play, even through massive popular movements such as an ill-conceived environmentalism that teaches ideas contrary to orthodoxy. We make, however, a profound error in attempting to graft those ideas onto orthodox faith. We risk falling prey to political agendas that would restrict economic advancement that would otherwise enhance human dignity.

The material prosperity that flows from free enterprise cannot save our souls. Neither can government restrictions on economic production. This much we can say: Free enterprise leads to a thriving of human community while state restrictions only impede the creativity of the human spirit.

There is no theory of spirituality, however in tune with Mother Earth, that can morally justify preventing people from acting justly to make better lives for each other.