

Question: Does being Catholic affect the way we should treat the environment?

Answer: Associating faith with the environment is not commonly done. We are brought up as Christians knowing that we have a responsibility towards our brothers and sisters but this idea rarely extends to the environment. We understand through the many teachings of the Bible and the Church that there is a responsibility to love our brothers and sisters and to treat them as we want to be treated. The “Golden Rule” has not readily been applied to our relationship with the environment. Instead, especially in our modern era the earth has been used for our own gains no matter how destructive the results may be. Examples consist of vast deforestation for logging without replanting and the testing of nuclear weapons that produce radioactive waste. Throughout history there have been some negative understandings of the created world. Beginning in the second century, a few Christian factions have taught that the created world is corrupt and evil. Gnosticism, (an early heretical movement in the church) held that the created world was made by a false god. By creating the world and placing us in it, the false god blinded us from the truth and thus deceived us into worshipping him instead of the true God.

It is a fact that through the centuries humanity has used the earth for its gains. This is what God intended. However, not until the industrial revolution did we have the capabilities and population density to begin to see the consequences of the abuses the world was suffering at our own hands. Due to the vast amounts of pollution that our fossil fuels emit, our rivers and lakes that were once clear slowly have become clouded and dirty. Fish, birds, and many land animals that were once commonly seen have quickly disappeared. In large part, this has all been the result of over hunting and fishing as well as chemical intoxication produced in factories and carelessly dumped into water supplies and environmental sanctuaries.

Due to the rapid decline of the environment, many people have surprisingly begun to turn to Christianity for answers. We learn in our creation story that God wanted us to, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28) It is important that we understand what God means by dominion in this passage. God did not say that man was to destroy the earth, instead, God entrusted us as stewards of the earth. In this context, dominion must mean a respect and responsibility towards creation. God created animals and plants and saw that they were good. This means that they share some sort of intrinsic value common to all of God’s creation. Jesus carries this tradition on in his ministry. Most of his miracles are intimately tied with the environment around him. Walking on water, turning water into wine, and catching the fish with the coin in its mouth are all examples of Jesus using the created world around him to show God’s goodness.

The role we as stewards play in the conservation of the earth is that while we are to use, consume, and harvest the fish of the sea, and the plants and animals on land, we are to do it in a manner in which balance is maintained. That balance is a knowledge of the earth’s limits for production and harvest so that we do not destroy and exhaust the fragile ecosystems we rely so heavily upon. This consciousness is imperative so that these resources will be available for generations to come. The Catholic Church teaches that we should do nothing that threatens the common good. Threatening the common good is the destruction of the environment. The Church teaches that the, “Use of the mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man’s dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for quality of life of his neighbor.” (*Catechism* 2415) Just like human beings give glory to God by being human beings, animals and plants give God glory by being animals and plants. It is our responsibility then as stewards to monitor and maintain their existence. Like St. Francis of Assisi, we should see the Gospel in all things created.