

Christian Discipleship in an Ecological Age

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Women at the Well Ministry, St. Paul, Minnesota Copyright 2008

Introduction



“I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10.10)

Followers of Jesus throughout the ages have been persons of prayer and compassion. They have taken on the mission of sharing Jesus' good news with the peoples of the whole world. In our time, we are called to be good news to the Earth itself. How aware are we of the ecological dangers that threaten our world today?

This retreat calls you to deepen your discipleship and to become more conscious of your relationship to the whole earth, and to the entire cosmos.

Open yourself to all that is around and within you. Sit quietly and feel the energy surrounding you. Be conscious of your breathing. Feel energy coming in with each inhalation. Be aware of tension leaving you with each exhalation. Let yourself be rooted in Mother Earth; at the same time feel lifted upward to the Creator of all. Breathe deeply for five minutes. Practice this same kind of breathing whenever you feel you are losing touch with yourself, with the world around you, or with God.

Before beginning the retreat, take some time to pray about how you have lived during the past 24 hours.

- Did I experience the presence of God? How?
- Was I aware of the marvels of creation?
- Did I look carefully at a tree or flower and really see it?
- Am I conscious of the air I breathe in and out, minute by minute?
- Am I building up awareness of the need to live simply and sustainably?

The five parts of this retreat feature wisdom figures of the past and present who can help us reflect on the challenge of being a Christian today.

Part 1: The Heavens Declare the Glory of God (Psalm 19.2)

Part 2: Greening in a Polluted World

Part 3: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Mother Earth

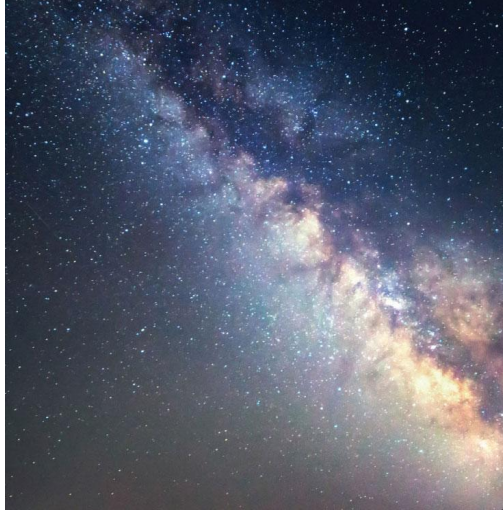
Part 4: A Vision of the Cosmic Christ

Part 5: Christian Discipleship and the Earth Charter

May this retreat encourage and strengthen you to live to the full your call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in our world.

Please turn now to Part 1 - The Heavens Declare the Glory of God

Part 1. "The Heavens Declare the Glory of God" (Ps. 19:2)



"How glorious is your name over all the earth! You have exalted your majesty above the heavens" (Psalm 8:2)

The marvelous poetic stories of creation (Gen. 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25) begin with the relationship of darkness and light and with the filling of the earth with humans and all other creatures. Throughout the Old Testament we see the interplay of light and darkness and observe human beings interacting with all of creation.

The Psalms speak to us of God's glory in the heavens and on the earth. Psalm 104 parallels the creation story. It begins with a magnificent hymn praising God's creative wisdom and power and speaks of God as clothed with majesty and glory, robed in light as with a cloak (2). In a similar way Psalm 27:1 speaks of light: "God is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear?"

Again and again in the psalms we pray to God about the wonders of creation: 'The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge' (Psalm 19:2-3). Throughout the ages the faithful have proclaimed, "How glorious is your name over all the earth! You have exalted your majesty above the heavens" (Ps. 8:2).

Before continuing this part of the retreat, go outside (or look out your window). See the brightness of the sun with its shadows or admire the stars and moon of the night sky. Let some of the words from the psalms echo through your mind and heart.

In other parts of the Old Testament, especially in the books of the prophets and in wisdom literature, we can find splendid descriptions of God's glory. In this beautiful passage from Isaiah we see reflected God's care for the entire world:

**"Rise up in splendor! Your light has come,
the glory of the Lord shines upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth,
and thick clouds cover the peoples;
But upon you the Lord shines,
and over you appears God's glory" (Isaiah 60:1-2)**

The Book of Wisdom sings of the glory of wisdom, which is God's glory:

**“For she is the refulgence of eternal light,
the spotless mirror of the power of God,
the image of God's goodness.”**

In Solomon's prayer personified Wisdom describes understanding of the universe:

**“For you gave me sound knowledge of existing things,
that I might know the organization of the universe
and the force of its elements,
The beginning and the end and the midpoint of times,
the changes in the sun's course
and the variations of the seasons.
Cycles of years, positions of the stars, natures of animals,
tempers of beasts,
Powers of the winds and thoughts of men,
uses of plants and virtues of roots--
Such things as are hidden I learned,
and such as are plain;
for Wisdom, the artificer of all, taught me.”
(Wisdom 7:17-22)**

Wow! This description, written over 2100 years ago, speaks today to all of us! Scientists see light and dark as essential components of the universe as they work toward scientific understandings of the beginnings of the cosmos.

The writing of first-century Paul the Apostle continue to show the living out of the Christian life in the context of the whole Mediterranean world. He tells the Romans: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are God's judgments and how unsearchable God's ways!”(Romans 11:34). This letter is Paul's thesis about the meaning of Christianity. He writes: “I am convinced that neither death, nor life,...nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39).

For Paul Christ is the light and life of the world. Throughout his letters and the Acts of the Apostles Paul shows us how to be Jesus' disciples and members of the Mystical Body. In his letters to the various Christian communities of his day he encourages the followers of Jesus' Way (and us) to live for God's glory and to prepare for the fullness of time.

In his letter to the Colossians Paul proclaims Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creatures...He is before all else that is. In him everything continues in being...It pleased God to make absolute fullness reside in him, and by means of him, to reconcile

everything in his person, both on earth and in the heavens, making peace through the blood of his cross" (1: 15-20).

Christian discipleship challenges all of us to promote and live in peace. It involves responding to the spiritual gifts of others and to our own gifts. Paul advises us that many spiritual gifts are given to each of us for the benefit of all: not only peace but also wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, and love (1 Cor. 12:4-9). As we read these words today, we can apply them to a much broader scope including how we live with our global environment.

Paul's known world, largely the Mediterranean area, differed greatly from the ever-expanding universe we know today in the 21st century. But the invitation to discipleship of Jesus, as described by both John and Paul, extends to us in a global way. The whole universe cries out to us to hear its need for compassion and justice.

As a Christian disciple how can you respond to this truly "awesome" concept? Which of the spiritual gifts that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, and love) do you live out most strongly for the benefit of the earth community? What more can you do with this gift?

Choose one of the above questions, and list very specific ways in which you could live out your role as a Christian disciple today. Write down your reflections in your journal so that later you can see how you are expanding your insights about discipleship in this day and age.

The Fourth Gospel in the New Testament begins with these cosmic words:

**In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
He was in the beginning with God.
All things came to be through him
and without him nothing came to be.
the light shines in the darkness
and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1: 1-5).**

These words speak in poetic language about the beginning of the universe. This gospel presents a progressive revelation of God's glory and love. Light and darkness permeate this gospel as they do the creation story in the book of Genesis. This gospel emphasizes the struggle between light and darkness with the light ultimately overcoming the darkness.

This disciple/gospel writer can inspire us in our belief and love. He was the eyewitness to all the final events of Jesus' life, leading us through the account of the life/death/resurrection of Jesus. We can learn from this disciple that the greatest role of every Christian is to hear the word of

God; believe in Jesus as son of God; love Jesus and all other people; act on and live out this love.

The heart of Jesus' message, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself," is not easy. From reading the New Testament we know how Jesus' disciples struggled to follow him. We learn how often they didn't understand, how they were sometimes jealous of one another, how they were sometimes weak or afraid. Maybe it is a comfort for us to know that many times they did not measure up as disciples.

Nevertheless Jesus' disciples after encountering him began to follow him, to listen to him, to observe his loving words and actions. They remained with him, journeyed with him, helped to bring his love to others, witnessed to him, and proclaimed him.

Now, as a Christian disciple of the 21st century, think about how to contribute to the struggle to secure the future well-being of the Earth. We are warned that the world is getting hotter, stormier, more crowded, and less biodiverse. How can we follow the Christian gospel and live in a way that is ecologically just and socially responsible?

A helpful way to discover how you are following Jesus daily as a disciple is to ask yourself: how did I encounter Jesus today:

- in praying?
- in giving or receiving kindness?
- in being concerned about the environment?
- by being a peacemaker at home or at work?

Then ask yourself whether your encounters have led you to deeper faith or love. Can you resonate with Jesus' words, spoken to all ages: "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10)?

Please now turn to Part 2, "Greening" in a Polluted World

Part 2. “Greening” in a Polluted World



**“I am the one whose praise echoes on high.
I adorn all the earth.
I am the breeze
that nurtures all things...
I am the rain
coming from the dew
that causes to laugh
with the joy of life.
I call forth tears,
the aroma of holy work.
I am the yearning for good.”**

(From *Hildegard of Bingen, Mystical Writings*, eds. Fiona Bowie and Oliver Davies, New York: Crossroad, 1990, 91-93)

Hildegard of Bingen, an outstanding wisdom figure and a model for Christian disciples today, lived in an earlier age but anticipated the present ecological movement. She awakened people to the sacredness of the earth and their responsibility for preserving it. In pointing out the relationship among religion, science and art she foreshadowed the cosmology of the 21st century.

One of the most remarkable concepts that Hildegard introduced is the “greening power” (viriditas) that enlivens the earth. She said that all of creation, humanity in particular, is showered with “greening” vitality to bear fruit. She took to heart these words in John’s gospel: “By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (John 15:8). These words continue with the sentence: “It was not you chose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain” (John 15:16).

Hildegard recognizes fire also as a cosmic symbol of the Spirit. Its ever-changing form is mysterious. “The light and heat that emanate from fire are indispensable to human well-being. It points to the greater fires in the universe, the glowing sun and stars, and the fierce lightening storms. All are powerful biblical symbols of the presence of God” as Elizabeth A. Johnson notes in *Women, Earth and Creator Spirit* (Paulist Press, 1993).

Hildegard has captured the symbolism of fire and the Spirit in this poem:

**“I, the highest and fiery power,
have kindled every living spark
and I have breathed out
nothing that can die....
I flame above
the beauty of the fields.**

**I shine in the waters:
in the sun, the moon and the stars,
I burn.
And by means of the airy wind,
I stir everything
into quickness
with a certain invisible life
which sustains all....
I, the fiery power,
lie hidden in these things
and they blaze from me.”
(as quoted in Johnson, p. 48).**

Johnson calls this act of creation “a Pentecost, a first and permanent outpouring of the fiery Spirit of life” (p. 48). She connects this with the contemporary scientific theory about the origin of the universe in a primeval explosion, called the Big Bang.

Hildegard, so many centuries ahead of her time, believed that Christ will bring fullness of life to people who respond to his call. In her life and vocation as abbess, theologian and preacher, poet and composer, healer and author she inspired many people to live fuller lives, to vitalize the earth and treat it well, and to be disciples of Jesus.

People today are attracted to 12th-century Hildegard because in her day she promoted holistic living, care of the environment, and creation-centered spirituality. As we know today, creation theology provides the basis for an understanding of human reality and its relationship to the rest of creation.

Like all disciples Hildegard served the people of her day with hospitality and compassion. She welcomed whoever came to her in need and offered physical or spiritual healing. She models for all contemporary Christians how to make holistic use of intelligence, imagination, and creativity. For her, earth was home and a source of delight. She believed that every human being should assume co-creative responsibility with God for the well-being of the earth.

Read slowly the poem at the beginning of Part 2, “I am the one whose praise echoes on high....” and let your imagination conjure up, one by one, all these images from nature. Let yourself feel the breeze, smell the rain, laugh with the greenness, yearn for the good. Become more alive in God's presence in creation. Then reflect on these questions:

- **How does my prayer include concern for the earth and its well-being?**
- **How can care for a lawn or gardening be a prayer for me?**
- **How can concern for global warming be a part of my prayer and my action?**

Hildegard has another quite different meditation/poem which shows how foresighted she was. She could be speaking about today's pollution!

Now in the people
that were meant to green,
there is no more life of any kind.
There is only shrivelled barrenness.
The winds are burdened
by the utterly awful stink of evil,
selfish goings-on.
Thunderstorms menace.
The air belches out
the filthy uncleanness of the peoples.

There pours forth an unnatural,
loathsome darkness,
that withers the green,
and wizens the fruit
that was to serve as food for the people.

Sometimes this layer of air
is full,
full of a fog that is the source
of many destructive and barren creatures,
that destroy and damage the earth,
rendering it incapable
of sustaining humanity.

Discipleship in any age requires courage and sometimes risk. Hildegard's courage came from the conviction that God would uphold her if she followed God's will. Against much opposition from the monks on whose property her convent stood, she was convinced that it was God's will that she, and her nuns, move to a location that would be more healthful. In the new location they could live a holistic life in harmony with creation.

She was so absorbed with nature, so taken by the revelation of the divine in creation that she sought out the finest scientific minds of her day. She made compilations of their knowledge, followed the scientific speculations on the shapes and elements of the universe, and wedded these to her own prayer and her own imagery. Her scientific thought evolved until finally, she wrote, "All science comes from God" (Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen, with commentary by Matthew Fox, Sante Fe: Bear and Company, 1985, p. 14).

Today science and spirituality are coming together in a new way to create a shared vision which gives hope to all of us. We are developing a new understanding of God's creation through scientific and theological study of the cosmos.

In many of his parables Jesus taught about the kingdom of God in terms of nature. In Matthew's gospel Jesus uses the example of the seed. He tells the crowd: "This is how it is with the Kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how" (4:26-27). This mystery of life is still a puzzle to modern scientists with modern equipment. What does make this seed grow?

Jesus continues, "Of its own accord, the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come" (4:28-29). Jesus is referring to the life principle itself. Ecologists are still probing the secrets of life much as spiritual seekers are doing. Many of us know much, or maybe little, about the mystery of life. In recent times ecologists and other scientists have expanded our awareness of the extent of the universe from the smallest seed to the largest galaxy.

As modern-day disciples we need to be on the cutting edge of what the ecologists are discovering as they try to build up the kingdom of God (although they do not use the term). They are helping us gain a deeper awareness of the ever-expanding universe.

Take some time now to reflect on the parable of the sower and the seed and the kingdom of God (Matt. 4:26-30). What kind of seed do you sow that will help bring about the kingdom of God?

Refer to Hildegard's poem, "I am the one whose praise echoes on high." How can you as a Christian disciple of the 21st century incorporate ecological awareness and concern in your prayer and activity?

Please turn to Part 3, "Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Mother Earth"

Part 3. “Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Mother Earth”



“All creatures of our God and King, lift up your voice and with us sing, alleluia.” (St. Francis of Assisi, Canticum of Creation)

For Francis of Assisi all that God has made is holy. Francis saw all creatures as brothers and sisters to be respected. He named creation in terms of a loving family: Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Sister Earth, Brother Wind. Francis' love for creatures endears him today to environmentally conscious people who see all creation as an interdependent community of life. Some theologians also recognize creation as an interwoven circle of life.

Many people know about Francis because of the bird-bath statues in gardens. Do you find such a statue in your yard or neighborhood? There is good reason for Francis to be there on the birdbath--because he loved birds, just as he loved all creatures. But how can we see beyond this view? How might we recognize Francis as an ecologist who respected all of creation?

Now recite slowly the line under the picture above. For what creatures might you give praise--violet? the sun? a favorite lake? a pet? Francis's biographers say he saw even in a bug the sacredness of life. How do you react to bugs?

As human beings we have special gifts but also special responsibilities to care for the earth as God cares for it. We of the 21st century are beginning to realize more and more our duty to preserve (and enhance) the earth rather than destroy it.

Francis of Assisi knew his responsibility and acted out of his concern. He expressed his love and praise of God throughout his life, singing of God's presence in all creation. He was inspired by Psalm 148 in his Canticum of Creation which praises God as the Creator of the universe. This Canticum praises Brother Sun, Sister Moon and Stars, Brother Wind and Air, Sister Water, Brother Fire, Sister Earth. In his praises he uses descriptive voices, praising Sister Earth, for example, with these words: “our mother who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces various fruits with colored flowers and herbs.” Francis saw himself as a simple servant and caretaker of creation. He addressed creatures as sisters and brothers, as equals, not as subjects to be dominated. He did not reject the world but rejoiced in it.

As an ecologist Francis was ahead of his time. The St. Anthony Messenger devotes a special issue (October, 2007) to “Francis, Faith, and Ecology.” In the lead article by Jack Wintz, Francis is called “Patron of Ecology.” Francis saw himself, like today's environmentalists, as part of the ecosystem, not as a proud master over and above it. Pope John Paul in 1979 also proclaimed St. Francis of Assisi the patron of ecology, citing him for being “an example of genuine and deep

respect for the integrity of creation.... St. Francis invited all creation--animals, plants, natural forces, even Brother Sun and Sister Moon--to give honor and praise to the Lord."

In the past many people were tempted to consider ownership of the earth as absolute. They failed to recognize God's ownership of all creation. For centuries human beings have consumed much more than their share of the world's resources. They, and perhaps we, have failed to consider that all—men, women, and children—have been created in the image of God. And think about all the plants, animals, and mineral resources human beings have harmed. What would Francis think today of the ecological danger our planet now faces?

How can you as a Christian disciple, along with the help of others, reverse these trends and help to bring back the biological diversity of God's creation?

Think about ordinary daily choices you make:

- **Do you bother to recycle?**
- **Do you travel in the most fuel-efficient way?**
- **Are you a conscientious consumer of produce and manufactured goods? Do you use heat and light economically and efficiently?**

What about societal choices? Are you aware:

- **of the thousands of plant and animal species now lost forever?**
- **of the stripping of the earth and forests?**
- **of the pollution of water?**
- **of the destruction of wetlands?**
- **of the wasteful and sometimes inhumane—treatment of animals?**
- **Think of a specific action you could do.**
- **How about praying as a lover of the cosmos?**

Francis was centuries ahead of his time. At long last we are beginning to listen to what he was calling all creatures to. Over the past century science has begun to recognize the story of a historical cosmos that emerged some 12 billion years ago. We are awakening to a new realization of its vastness and complexity. At the same time we are becoming aware of our current environmental crisis with its radical destruction of species and habitat. Our Earth took more than four billion years to bring forth the abundance of life that we now are endangering.

As Christian disciples today we are called to care about the life systems of earth, to value diversity, and to address the unmet ecological needs of our human, plant, and animal communities. Francis of Assisi, a Christian disciple in his own day, is still present in spirit in the crises of our day.

Look once more to St. Francis. What have you learned from reflecting on Francis that can make a difference in how you live? How can you personally cultivate respect for all creation? Think of an experience in which you saw an example of reverence for creation or lack of it. What have you learned from Francis about deepening your spiritual life?

Please turn to Part 4, Vision of the “Cosmic Christ”

Part 4. Vision of the “Cosmic Christ”



“In very truth, it is God, and God alone whose Spirit stirs up the whole mass of the universe in ferment.”

(Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*)

With his vision of the Cosmic Christ, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, priest-scientist of the 20th century, moves us beyond the insights of St. Francis about the living world.

As scientist, priest, theologian, and explorer, Teilhard de Chardin, living nineteen centuries

after Paul, saw the world as a vast, living organism. In his theology Teilhard sought to unite the thought of Paul about the mystical body of Christ with his own insights about evolution and contemporary cosmology.

All through his teachings Paul saw Christian disciples as members of one body, as other Christs. He wrote in his letter to the Romans: “For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another” (12:4-5). All Christians form the mystical body of Christ.

What do you understand about the mystical body? How does the mystical body serve as the image of your Christian community or of the Church as a whole?

In his constant searching for truth, Teilhard lived as a Christian disciple in the fullest sense of that word. Deep prayer guided him throughout his life of passionate intellectual and spiritual adventure. As a Jesuit priest, theologian, scientist, and explorer, he saw the world as a vast living organism. His tremendous mind led him to continually ask profound questions about the meaning of cosmic and human life. Born and educated in France, Teilhard spent much of his life in the Far East searching for truth about God and the universe.

The theory of evolution, developed by Charles Darwin shortly before Teilhard's birth, absorbed Teilhard's interest and guided much of his research. Although the theory of evolution threatened some peoples limited understanding of science and scripture, Teilhard's deep Christian faith enabled him to see great value in the new understanding of the creation of the earth.

With eyes of faith Teilhard recognized in the theory of evolution the guiding principle that organisms evolved toward consciousness, love, and higher forms of spiritual energy. He sought to strengthen the bonds of human community around the world through the power of love.

Early in his career Teilhard realized the connection between the love of God and science. His *Mass on the World* (p. 29) captures his mystical vision. In that essay he prays,

“So, my God, I prostrate myself before your presence in the universe...beneath the lineaments of all that I shall encounter this day, all that happens to me, all that I achieve, it is you I desire, you I await.” Teilhard's faith in the presence of Christ was his inspiration for everything he did.

Recite Teilhard's prayer above, and open your mind and heart to his contributions to both science and spirituality. Which of his ideas thus far resonate with you? How does he fit your definition of “disciple”?

Sometimes referring to the cosmic sense expressed in the writings of John the evangelist and Paul the apostle, Teilhard had a passionate sense of the world being full and vibrant with the presence God. It became apparent to him that the presence of God reaches all the elements of the world through and in the body of Christ.

The more Teilhard came to know and experience the natural world, the closer he came to God. He recognized that those who seek God encounter God by turning toward the things of earth in love and reverence. For Teilhard the natural delight he took in life and all that exists was the goal of mysticism. It is said that “aliveness” radiated from him.

Teilhard was a Christian disciple throughout his scientific exploration and in the writing and sharing of his profound insights. He revealed his full life through his many books. He wrote his greatest book, *The Divine Milieu*, “for those who love the world.” This spiritual masterpiece shows a mystical vision of communion and union with God which gives every human being access to a “divine milieu.” In this vision everything is transformed into the fullness that is Jesus Christ. Because Teilhard's thought was ahead of his time, *The Divine Milieu* was not published until after his death.

The “divine milieu” describes the diffuse presence and influence of God at all levels of created reality, in all areas of human experience. Teilhard saw the “divine milieu” as a field of divine energy with one central focus, God, from which everything flows. For him, the fulfillment of all things will be the “omega point.” Christ is the Cosmic Christ or “Omega Point” in whom at the end time all creation will be fulfilled.

For Teilhard the Resurrection was truly the central mystery of his life--as it was for the early disciples and is for faithful Christians today. He died on Easter, the Feast of the Resurrection, 1955. Thus he experienced, as a faithful Christian disciple, his own life-death-resurrection mystery.

In this 21st century we can honor Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as a Christian disciple who follows in the footsteps not only of Paul but of the writer of the Fourth Gospel, of Hildegard, and of Francis. These wisdom figures are all model disciples for our time.

It would take a lifetime to absorb the depth of Teilhard's insights and prayer! But we can bring this section of the retreat to a conclusion with these words from *The Divine Milieu* (Part 3, ch. 3):

“What I cry out for, like every being, with my whole life and all my earthly passion, is something very different from an equal to cherish: it is a God to adore.”

Read the above words prayerfully and think about what Christian discipleship means to you.

Please turn to Part 5, Christian Discipleship and the Earth Charter

Part 5. Christian Discipleship and the Earth Charter



“To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of culture and life forms we are one human family and one Earth Community with a common destiny.”

(from Preamble to the Earth Charter)

All Christians of the 21st century, indeed all human beings, have a sacred duty to care for the community of life on our earthly home. The Earth Charter, which was created by the United Nations and presented to the earth community in 2000, can inspire in all of us “a new sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the human family and the larger living world.”

As Christian disciples guided, first of all, by the words of sacred scripture, we can find the gospel of Matthew echoed in this new charter for the human family. Matthew, in his well-known twenty-fifth chapter about the last judgment, predates the Earth Charter by two millennia.

In his parable we read that at the end all the nations will be assembled before the throne of the Son of Man in his glory. Jesus then divides the human family into the righteous and the wicked, rewarding the good for their mercy and compassion. These good members of the human family, unaware of how much they have done for those in need, ask him, “When did we see you hungry..., thirsty..., a stranger..., naked..., ill.... in prison...?” He responds: “Come, you who are blessed... and inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me” (25:37-40).

For us today the Earth Charter provides a way to continue what Christians have always been challenged to do. For people of God living in the 21st century, the Earth Charter sets forth the ethical vision needed for the present and future world. This challenge to all the peoples of today and tomorrow can awaken “a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and joyful celebration of life” (conclusion of the Charter).

What can Christian disciples, and people of every faith, contribute to the struggle to reverse the damage and neglect to which we have subjected the earth? How can we assure the future well-being of the Earth?

How are you educating yourself (and others) on such problems as global warming, reducing the wasteful use of energy, the loss of species such as birds and fish, loss of water access for many people?

Reflect on this slogan: “Think globally and act locally.” How can you be more aware of what is going on either globally or locally? One way is to look to current media for suggestions. For example, USA Weekend (included in many Sunday newspapers) focused its September 17, 2007 issue on “37 exciting, easy ways to help the Earth.” Each way suggests how the action is good for the environment and why it is good for you.

The Earth Charter outlines for all of us a broad conception of what constitutes a sustainable world community. As Christian disciples let us be challenged by these four overarching principles:

1. Respect and Care for the Community of Life,
2. Ecological Integrity,
3. Social and Economic Justice,
4. Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace.

In calling us to respect and care for the community of life, the Earth Charter asks us to respect Earth (the capital letter is always used) in a number of ways. How can we care for any local situation with understanding, compassion, and love? How can we help the community we live in to be more just and peaceful? What can we do personally to foster Earth's bounty and beauty around us?

Many people around us today, in the U.S. and the rest of the world, are increasingly conscious of the dire need to protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems. But much more must be done to establish and safeguard nature and preserve our heritage of wild land and marine life. What can each of us contribute personally to managing the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest and marine life?

Sadly enough, 21 centuries after the gospels were written, poverty is still so pervasive and worldwide that the Earth Charter in its third section on social and economic justice must call for the eradication of poverty. It is still “an ethical, social, and environment imperative.” The gospels for two millennia have been calling all Christians, as the Earth Charter puts it, to “uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous people and minorities.” This is what the gospel has always asked of Christian disciples but we need to expand and deepen our commitment to justice for the world.

The gospel has always called Christians to be peacemakers. This is the challenge of the fourth principle of the Earth Charter on democracy, nonviolence, and peace. This final principle challenges all Christian disciples, from Jesus' day to ours: “recognize that peace is the

wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth and the larger whole of which we all are a part.”

This Fourth Principle asks us for many actions from global to personal. One of them is “to treat all living beings with respect and consideration” (#15). This is something any of us can do in ordinary ways and actions. We can prevent cruelty to animals and protect them from harm.

Certainly we Christian disciples need to make even more efforts toward peace than we may already be doing: “Recognize that peace is the wholeness created by right relationships with oneself, other persons, other cultures, other life, Earth, and the larger whole of which we are all a part” (#16).

How are we living out this call to be a peacemaker in our own surroundings?

It is quite amazing, and providential, that the Earth Charter challenges all those of us, living 21 centuries after the first promulgation of the Christian gospel of Jesus Christ, to live in peace, justice, and harmony with the whole world. We might look back at the wisdom figures presented in this retreat to see how they resonate with these Earth Charter principles.

John the Beloved Disciple and Paul the Apostle, Hildegard of Bingen, Francis of Assisi, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin--these wisdom figures, coming from the first two millennia, are calling us to live the Earth Charter of the 21st century—or earth, as we have known it, will die. This Charter challenges each of us living today: “Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.”

Bring this retreat to a close with these powerful words of St. Francis. Reflect on each line, applying its truth to your Christian discipleship in the 21st century:

“Lord, make me a channel of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love,

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith.

Where there is despair, hope.

Where there is darkness, light.

Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much-

seek to be consoled as to console,

to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive.

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.”

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