



Appeared in *The Catholic Virginian* April 2, 2001

## Sacred Places

This past weekend, I participated in a symposium sponsored by the Catholic Committee of Appalachia. I have served as bishop liaison with CCA for the past 20 years. The symposium was on the topic of "The Columbia River Watershed," a pastoral letter issued by the Catholic bishops of the Northwest United States and the pastoral letter of the Appalachian region. I was asked to be the keynote speaker with reflections on the second Appalachian pastoral issued in 1995 entitled "At Home in the Web of Life." About 160 people, many who are long-time friends, participated in the conference. Among them were 30 participants from the Diocese of Richmond.

Let me share some "snapshots" of what proved to be a most rewarding experience:

Sister Josè Hobday, a Native American from Gallup, New Mexico, gave a spiritual reflection on Friday evening, March 23, about the title of the symposium: "Sacred Places". She emphasized that wherever we go, we create a sacred space by our very presence. Our individual space is connected to all those other spaces created by the rest of humanity. We must be conscious, then, of our place in the entire web of life. As we develop a compassion for ourselves, and our own needs, we will extend that compassion to those who share life along with us.

Sister Josè called us to "wake up to the wonders of creation" – realizing how we touch creation with holiness wherever we go. By our presence in creation, we make all creation sacred and holy. This knowledge helps us understand the "rivers of life" – rivers of memory, flowing with the sacredness we have left in our wake; rivers of the present moment, filled with the power of our sanctifying presence and rivers of vision, rushing forward swelling with hopes and dreams. Over and over, Sister Josè emphasized our need to heighten our consciousness of the many ways we can and do make all creation sacred.

I spoke to the assembly on Saturday morning. I gave reflections on the two Appalachian pastorals – "This Land Is Home to Me," published in 1975 and "At Home in the Web of Life," published in 1995 on the

20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first pastoral. It is hard to believe that I am the only bishop still in active ministry who signed the first pastoral, and one of only two bishops still living 26 years after we signed it. The two pastorals are parallel documents, the second flowing from the first in addressing the realities that had developed 20 years later. "This Land Is Home to Me" is about powerlessness and poverty throughout the Appalachian region. It speaks of the land and its people as being interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. The desecration of the land leads inevitably to the desecration of the people; the exploitation of one gives way to the exploitation of the other. In other words, the way we treat the land is the way we treat people, and vice-versa.

The pastoral, the first of its kind, raises consciousness that the land, as God's creation is – like the people created by God – a sacred creation. We are not to have "dominion over" (a common translation of Genesis), but we are to be in partnership with creation. In those days – the mid 70's – and for a century before, coal was king. The mountains were abused and ravaged by strip mining. Coal dust permeates the very air. Streams were polluted and black lung disease was epidemic among the people. Mine safety took a back seat to profit. In the final words of the pastoral, written in poetic verse – "in a wilderness of idolatrous destruction, the great voice of God still cries out for life."

The second pastoral emphasizes the importance of sustainable communities where people in all of nature live in harmony in the "web of life." The number one fear in Appalachia is that people can no longer sustain themselves – that Appalachia will be home only to the unemployed, where local businesses will cease to exist, where the land will become barren through deforestation, where empty mines will become graveyards for out-of-state garbage and toxic waste, where the imprisoned will be warehoused and the land will remain defaced forever. The present unsustainable direction would condemn Appalachia to become a wasteland, an ecological disaster.

The second pastoral emphasizes that the culture of life must supplant the culture of death. People and the land are woven together, where earth's vibrant creativity reveals God's own creativity. The mountain forests are a sacred cathedral, a holy dwelling of abundant life forms which all need one another and all reveal God's awesome majesty and tender embrace. People must work together to form sustainable communities by conserving and not wasting, by living simply but in better ways, by protecting the richness of nature, by forming people spiritually and by following God's values. The humble people of

Appalachia are teachers to the rest of us. They teach us how to be at home in God's holy web of life.

The Catholic bishops of the Northwest region wrote in January 2001 about the Columbia River Watershed, the caring for creation and the common good. The central themes of concern are similar to those of Appalachia. Industrial development provided needed goods and jobs in the watershed. But modern advancement, in the name of progress, has brought about the endangerment and possible extinction of animals and species of fish – particularly of salmon. Agricultural chemicals used to control pests and increase profits are sources of pollution of both land and water. Mining has left the land and water tainted as well. Present methods of forestry cause increased run off and sedimentation.

Jobs are needed to provide for people's livelihood, but at the same time the environment needs protection. These two needs need not be incompatible. Through dialogue, alternatives are a top priority. Are we not harming ourselves by causing environmental degradation? We need to see the interconnection of all creation as a sacred place. Creation has its own integrity and is not there just for us. We are not self-sufficient. We must have active compassion for the less fortunate – both in society and in the environment. We must promote both the common good and the good of the common. We see the image of God in all of creation. Each space then becomes a sacred space.

Four panelists reflected on the two morning addresses. They pointed out that we must experience the divine in the natural world like a sacramental presence. We must read the signs of our time and hear not only human conversation, but also the voices of nature. We are at a new moment where we speak not just of the human in relation to the divine, of humans in relation to one another, but now of humans in relation to the earth. Our relation in the community of life is not to be stewards but partners living in friendship.

From the Jewish perspective, we live in covenant with God, we are co-workers and co-sharers with God. All of nature reveals the signature or imprint of God. We can only solve ecological problems by applying spiritual values. If, as sacred Scripture says, "the earth is the Lord's," then all is sacred and holy. We cannot talk about the sanctity of life simply referring to human life. We need to recover the source of the sacred, to re-appreciate God's handiwork. We must call the defacing of creation, in whatever way it happens, a form of idolatry and therefore sinful.

All the speakers emphasized the need for an alternative vision, to see the interconnectedness of all God's creative work. We need to view our

world through a new lens which imagines our being at home in the web of life and our living and being always in a sacred space.

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