

Good Sense, Good Air: While we live we are responsible to the Lord

IN THE BEGINNING, WHEN GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH – AND THE EARTH WAS WITHOUT FORM OR SHAPE, WITH DARKNESS OVER THE ABYSS AND A MIGHTY WIND SWEEPING OVER THE WATERS – THEN GOD SAID: LET THERE BE....AND THERE WAS.... GOD LOOKED AT EVERYTHING HE HAD MADE, AND FOUND IT VERY GOOD. (NAB, Gen. 1: 1,2,31a)

Good morning, everyone, and thank you for the kind invitation to offer a few words at the Festival of Faiths Interfaith Prayer Breakfast which this year is focusing on “Sacred Air: Breath of Life.” I have had a long association with the Catholic Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs; so I feel very much at home with all of you this morning. Currently as Chair of the Bishops’ Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development we are giving serious attention to issues of environmental justice , particularly as they affect poor and vulnerable people.

Before God in the great act of creation gave order to the existing chaos, Genesis depicts a mighty wind sweeping over the waters, a wind which had almost a divine force, the very breath (‘ruah’ in Hebrew) of a mighty being whom we know as God. In this preparatory moment for creation the power of God is already manifested. The chaos itself before creation was never beyond the control of God. THEN GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT AND THERE WAS LIGHT.(Gen.1:3) The spoken word of God is all powerful and creation comes into being. The dynamic word of God makes all things to be. The word of God and the deeds of God are in many ways one and the same. And so it happened, THERE WAS LIGHT. The word of God in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the books we as Christians accept as the Old Testament is all powerful and never is without the accompanying “ruah” or breath of God which gives life. In Hebrew the words for ‘spirit,’ ‘breath,’ and ‘wind’ are all one and the same. They are symbols of the power of God the Creator who dynamically brings into being all that exists. GOD LOOKED AT EVERYTHING HE MADE AND FOUND IT VERY GOOD. (Gen.1:31) Creation in itself, by its very nature gives praise and glory to God. BLESS THE LORD, proclaims Daniel, ALL YOU WORKS OF THE LORD....ALL YOU WINDS BLESS THE LORD; PRAISE AND EXULT HIM FOREVER. (Dan. 3:57, 65)

But that which has been created by God is a gift from God for humanity. God blessed humankind which God had created in God’s own image (male and female He had created them) and commanded them to subdue the earth and have dominion. They would have almost divine dominion over all creation, but this dominion, rightly understood and, like all authority from God, demands a response back to God and a duty to steward what God has given to us for the good of all the human family. Pope Benedict captured this profound truth in his World Day of Peace message in 2010 when he wrote: “Seeing creation as God’s gift to humanity helps us understand our vocation and worth as human beings...Contemplating the beauty of creation inspires us to recognize the love of the Creator.” We would not subscribe to the thinking of those who define human beings solely in terms of coming from nature, beholden to nature as if nature or the earth were some kind of a god to which humankind is responsible. While indeed man is described in Gen 2:7 as coming out of the dust of the ground, it is God who “formed the man...and blew into his nostrils the breath of life.” Genesis clearly teaches the responsibility of man and woman to God their Creator.

When I was growing up in the San Fernando Valley in the 1950's, I can remember playing handball outdoors at the high school seminary and coming indoors afterwards with a burning chest and feeling bad from the polluted air. As a young priest in the San Gabriel Valley often we could not see the mountains. You might not believe it but the air in the Los Angeles Basin is cleaner now than when I lived there. Lead was taken out of the gasoline. Cars have to have catalytic converters. Back yard incinerators have been banned for a long time.

But the air in the San Joaquin Valley of California where I live now is also polluted. And statewide, more than 9000 Californians are reported to die prematurely each year from air pollution. Asthma hospitalization rates in California are five times the national average. The counties of the Stockton diocese have been rated "F" in ozone count, and two of the counties have a grade of "F" in particulate matter. I looked up Jefferson County and found that the State of the Air Report from the American Lung Association gave this area the same grade of "F" for ozone and "D" for particulate matter. Clean air is a great concern for all of us, especially for our children and senior citizens.

In 2005 our diocese began an Environmental Justice Project and chose air pollution as our first issue because we are all both victims of air pollution and contributors to it. We have a small committee of volunteers who have been able to acquaint parish leaders about Catholic Social Teaching on the environment and we have been successful in influencing legislation at the state level. It is our concern as people of faith to care for the air entrusted to us as a gift which belongs to the human family. And as people of faith, we bring a moral voice to often-contentious debates about environmental concerns such as air pollution. Those debates frequently focus solely on costs and benefits. People of faith bring a unique and important message: about the care of God's gift of creation, about those most vulnerable to environmental injustice – those on the margins of our societies and those with fewest resources to protect themselves or advocate on their own behalf.

We urge policy-makers to move beyond the cost/benefit analysis and consider the common good. This requires that all of us work together as individuals and collectively to protect the environment and human life beginning with the unborn. Again may I quote Pope Benedict XVI whom many call the "green pope:" WE MUST RESPECT THE INNER LAWS OF THIS EARTH, WE MUST LEARN THESE LAWS AND OBEY THESE LAWS IF WE WISH TO SURVIVE...AND IF WE MUST BE OBEDIENT TO THE VOICE OF THE EARTH, THIS IS EVEN TRUER FOR THE VOICE OF HUMAN LIFE. NOT ONLY MUST WE CARE FOR THE EARTH, WE MUST RESPECT THE OTHER, OTHERS: BOTH THE OTHER AS AN INDIVIDUAL PERSON, AS MY NEIGHBOR, AND OTHERS AS COMMUNITIES WHO LIVE IN THE WORLD AND HAVE TO LIVE TOGETHER.(Lorenzago Di Cadore, Italy 2007)

In the Diocese of Stockton we have taken these words to heart. We are linking environmental justice to our consistently pro-life concerns. We remind Catholics in our parishes that the protection of the environment is vital as it is the envelope in which all life is contained.

It is hard to imagine a situation that so clearly illustrates this link between the environment and life issues as the impact of mercury and other toxic air pollution on children's health. Children, inside and outside the womb, are uniquely vulnerable to environmental hazards and exposure to toxic pollutants in the environment. Their bodies, behaviors and size leave them more exposed than adults to such health hazards.

It is well known that power plants are the largest source of mercury and other toxic air pollution in the United States. This hazardous air pollution from power plants is causing great harm to the environment, to the food chain, and to human health. Scientists tell us that mercury from power plants is contaminating our lakes, streams, rivers and fish. This is of great concern for pregnant women and their unborn and newborn children since mercury exposure can interfere with children's developing nervous systems, impairing their ability to think and learn. It is reported that one in six babies are now born with harmful levels of mercury in their blood. And it is my understanding that all 50 states have fish advisories in place due to concern about the presence of mercury. (Letter of June 20, 2011 from Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, USCCB, to US Environment Protection Agency)

It has also become common knowledge, although denied by some, that excess greenhouse gases – primarily from the burning of fossil fuels – are seriously impacting our climate with significant consequences for humanity. Just as in the Diocese of Stockton it is the poorest people (migrant farmworkers, the elderly, the homeless) who are most impacted by our local air pollution, so too it is poor people around the world who suffer the most from climate change. They do not have the resources to protect themselves from extended droughts or severe flooding. They do not have insurance policies to guard against crop failures, homes lost to floods or diseases exacerbated by hunger and thirst. Scientists tell us that erratic weather patterns are likely to intensify with a warming planet, causing people around the world to suffer their effects. Unless we begin seriously to address our carbon footprint, future generations may experience even greater hardship.

Again Benedict XVI in his encyclical letter "Caritas in Veritate" stated "The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere." (51) For this reason Catholics have been working closely with our interfaith partners to raise awareness that addressing climate change is about caring for creation and protecting poor and vulnerable people who have contributed the least to causing climate change. The Catholic Church is working with the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, whose members include the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Council of Churches, the Evangelical Environmental Network and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. Through this partnership Catholics and Evangelicals are also working together to raise awareness about the need for a national standard that would significantly reduce mercury and other toxic air pollution from power plants and would protect our unborn and young children.

We have found that being able to speak with one voice – although we come from diverse faith traditions – has strengthened our ability to advocate for those whose voice is often not being heard in Washington. We can be the voice of the people in poverty and vulnerable communities both here and around the world who are most affected by climate change and environmental harm. Of special note is our Catholic Coalition on Climate Change and its twelve 12 national Catholic partners, including the Catholic Bishops’ Conference. Among other projects the Coalition trains ambassadors who bring the message of the gospel and church teaching to this enormously important issue of caring for God’s creation so as to serve the common good of all people and future generations.

When God breathed into humans the breath of life, “the man became a living being.” We praise God; we honor God; we serve God when we care for all living beings by protecting the air which is God’s gift to us. As stewards of God’s creation we can live more simply, using the earth’s resources wisely, reducing our consumption, working to eliminate air pollution and reducing our carbon footprint. We ask God for the virtue of prudence which enables us to make wise decisions in responding to the challenges of the environment and in being faithful stewards responsible to God our Creator. In the end it just makes good sense to want to have clean air for our children and families to breathe and for future generations. Scientists are clear: the climate is changing and our human activities pollute the air locally and globally. Our ecumenical and inter-faith efforts are powerful and can make an enormous difference for all peoples. We can give voice to all creation in praising God our Creator by caring for the environment, our home on earth, and accepting responsibility for clean air.

O LORD, OUR LORD, HOW AWESOME IS YOUR NAME THROUGH ALL THE EARTH!

Bishop Stephen Blaire 2048 words