

# A Covenant with Creation

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## **Introduction**

Having been born and raised in a major U.S. city (Minneapolis) it never occurred to me early in my life just how dependent human beings are on their natural surroundings. With its rapid pace, endless shopping malls, and slick thoroughfares, city life doesn't often lend itself to reflecting on the radical dependence and interrelatedness of all life. I began to experience an initial sense of life as an intricate and interconnected "web" during the time that I spent in the U.S. Army. Part of my training in the Army involved learning to survive off the land. I remember distinctly how, at the age of 19, stripped of creature comforts and given only a meager survival kit, I spent the first evening of my first survival exercise staring into the darkness, completely overwhelmed by the immensity of a forest in Southern Bavarian, Germany. It was at that moment, I believe, that I began to enter into a new relationship with nature. Nearly 17 years later I am seeking to deepen this experience as a Franciscan friar-priest. This covenant with creation represents my desire and intent to bring the Franciscan heritage of care for creation that I have inherited to bear on perhaps the direst situation the human family has ever faced: the survival of nature *and* the survival of truly human nature. This covenant is the fruit of a fairly intensive preliminary study into the scriptural basis for caring for creation, the basis from the Catholic tradition (namely the scriptural and social teaching traditions), and the basis from contemporary theology's approach to the environment and ecology (known as ecological or environmental theology). In the drafting of this covenant I was aided to a great extent by feedback offered to me by Fr. Mike Byron, Professor of Systematic Theology at The Saint Paul School of Divinity, Fr. Kelly Nemeck, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate and author of a number of spiritual books, and John Haught, Distinguished Research Professor at Georgetown University and an author in the area of environmental theology. I remain deeply indebted to each of them for their invaluable assistance, insight, and encouragement.

## **Purpose of Covenant**

This covenant attempts to establish a solid foundation from scripture, tradition, and contemporary theology for approaching creation as stewards and partners. On one level the covenant seeks to provide answers to the question, "what does our Christian and Catholic faith have to do with the environmental crises?" On a deeper level I believe the covenant can serve as a framework for cultivating a Christian eco-spirituality by providing principles to guide our relationship with nature and with one another that have deep roots in scripture and tradition. The covenant does not address the practical issue of "what should we do" about the environmental crises but addresses the spiritual issue of what the crises *wishes to do with us* by helping us to change our approach to nature. The covenant is of practical value in the sense that it provides a great deal of support and references from the Catholic tradition regarding the topic of care of creation and how it is a necessary and non-negotiable part of a faith tradition that follows a God who became a part of creation through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

## Covenant with Creation

The winds of change, transformation, and revolution are sweeping and swirling all around, in, and through us and the entire cosmos. If you but strain a little, you will hear the symphony and melody of a creation that labors and longs to be brought to the goal of its fulfillment: **Christ crucified and glorified**. Now more than ever, creation groans for a share in the redemption won by Christ and waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-21). For far too long creation has been exploited to serve human need and greed. However, there is a movement growing within the human family to cooperate more fully with God's Spirit in "making all things new." (Rev. 21:5).

As God's children, we desire to be caught up in and to further this movement by becoming **co-creators** with the Lord in helping to lead *all of creation* into the promised liberation of God's Kingdom. **The cross of Christ** serves as the standard of this kingdom and proclaims unfailingly by its outstretched arms and unifying center that *all things* have been brought to peace and reconciliation with God (Col. 1:20). To bear the cross in our day for the sake of Christ moves us to make this **covenant with creation**. In making this covenant we promise to acknowledge, celebrate, and place equal emphasis on the **intrinsic, instrumental, sacramental, and relational** value of creation. We promise to approach creation as gracious, grateful, and gentle **stewards**. As stewards we reverence creation as **subject, servant, and sacrament**.

However, we believe that we are invited to go even farther. In covenanting with creation we embrace the deep intuition of Francis of Assisi, patron saint of ecology, that creation is mother, brother, and sister in Christ whom we are called by God to sojourn with as **partner**. Therefore, we covenant with creation as a partner in praise of God, a partner on pilgrimage to God, and a partner of God's promise to bring the fullness of the Kingdom. For its part, **creation covenants with us** in promising exquisite beauty, bold adventure, comforting and at times challenging companionship, and selfless service of human need. Furthermore, creation promises to help us realize our God given dignity as creatures fashioned after the divine likeness. Finally, since humans form an integral part of creation, in making a covenant with creation we likewise make a covenant with all persons, especially those who have suffered and stand to suffer the most as a result of the degradation of creation. We promise the oppressed, vulnerable, poor, and needy of the human family that we will work alongside them to bring about the **equity and justice** that is the cornerstone of right and holy relationship between God and all creatures.

## The Moral and Ethical Basis for the Covenant

The publishing of the findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) on February 2<sup>nd</sup> and April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007 represents a firm consensus in the scientific community that the family of creation (of which we are a part) stands at an ecological and environmental crossroads. The intersection in which we find ourselves is the unavoidability of having to make a decision for or against environmental conservation and restoration. To choose an ethic of sustainable and equitable economic development and the wise use of alternative energy sources which emit little or none of the gases associated with global warming is to choose for the conservation and restoration of the environment. To choose the opposite of unrestricted economic development with little or no regard for the overuse of natural resources and the negative impact on the environment of pollution and the burning of fossil fuels is to choose against the environment. While there is the option of choosing at this particular historical juncture which direction we will chart not only for ourselves but especially for future generations, we do not have the choice of delaying the decision. Delaying a decision necessarily means opting against the conservation and restoration of the environment. Economists and environmentalists alike have argued convincingly that such an attempt to ignore the unavoidable decision that faces us will have severe consequences in terms of what it will cost future generations both in resources and biodiversity. If action is not taken within a decade to “reverse the flow of carbon into the atmosphere” and reduce carbon emissions by at least 80 percent by 2050, life on our planet will be completely changed.<sup>1</sup> Such change includes the melting of the polar ice caps and Greenland ice shelf, the raising of sea levels along low lying coastal regions (creating hundreds of millions of refugees), the bleaching and destruction of coral reefs (along with the aquatic life that depends on them), major adverse impacts on agriculture and the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of nearly every nation, and others. The unparalleled harm that these changes could cause present and future generations, especially the poor and vulnerable, make global warming a moral and ethical issue of the highest priority.

Therefore, Catholics and other Christians are encouraged to decide for the environment not only through organized political activism and practical daily decisions but likewise by choosing to become **stewards** and **partners** with the environment in ratifying this covenant with creation. In other words, political and practical concern about the environment is not enough to save it. What is required by all people, especially Christians who believe that God became part of creation in Christ, is a spirituality deeply rooted in creation and nature. The specifically Catholic Christian nature of this covenant consists in the fact that it is based on scripture, the sacramental and social teaching traditions, and contemporary contributions made mainly by Catholic theologians in the area of scripture and environmental theology. What this particular covenant proposes is a foundation for understanding and striving to realize what is implied by the phrase “preserving the integrity of creation” often used in Christian circles. In particular, the covenant will explain that understanding and realizing this notion can be achieved through four modes of valuing, two fundamental approaches, and three key aspects to each approach. Likewise, the covenant will identify practical ways of realizing these modes of valuing, fundamental approaches, and key aspects.

## The Scriptural Basis for a Covenant with Creation

Many people of faith, in particular the Christian faith, believe that from the moment creation became conscious of itself in the human person, humans were entrusted with creation by the divine mandate to care for it as gracious, grateful, and gentle stewards.<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis is placed on the word “entrusted” to represent an important shift in the approach to creation from creation as “gift”, which implies something that we can act arbitrarily toward, to creation as “sacred trust”, indicating that we have duties and responsibilities toward creation and God).<sup>3</sup> This ethic of care is based on four distinct ways in which humans are to value creation. One way that humans are to value creation is for its intrinsic value (meaning that creation has value in itself). Creation has value in itself because God is the author of creation and repeatedly pronounces it “good” (Gen. 1:1, 4, 10, 12, 18, 20, and 25). These passages make it clear that before humans arrive on the scene creation and nature are given value and intrinsic worth by God.<sup>4</sup> (Though a distinction can be made between the concepts of creation and nature, when we use the term “creation” from this point forward we also mean “nature”).

Another way in which the human community is to value creation is for its instrumental value (signifying that creation serves the needs of humanity and other creatures as well). The instrumental value of creation is highlighted in the book of Genesis by God entrusting the human person with the bounty of the earth to serve humanity’s needs (Gen. 1:29 and 2:16). It must be carefully noted, however, that according to Genesis 1:30, *God gives the resources of creation to other creatures as well, implying that humans do not have exclusive rights to creation over and against other creatures*. This fact also implies that caring for creation means ensuring other creatures have what they need not only to survive *but to thrive*. Additionally, humans are to have a sacred regard for creation by virtue of its sacramental value (meaning that creation must be respected for its capacity to manifest the divine presence and promise of God). The sacramental value of creation is indicated by God making use of a phenomenon of nature (i.e., the rainbow) as a sign of God’s covenant with all creation (Gen. 9:12-17). Henceforth, therefore, when the rainbow makes its appearance in the sky, God and humans alike will be “reminded” of God’s promises.

This action by God indicates that creation has the capacity to help manifest God’s divine presence and promise (a further explanation of the sacramental value of creation nature will be provided later). The intrinsic, instrumental, and sacramental value of creation supports the notion that creation is not merely an object that humans approach as stewards but also a subject that humans are intended by God to approach as partner and companion.<sup>5</sup> One way in which creation and all creatures “partner” with the human person is by helping humans realize the dignity of being created in the divine likeness. This dignity is realized by humans precisely through exercising the same care and concern for creation that God does.<sup>6</sup> Hence, as a subject whose very existence makes it possible for humans to experience their divinely appointed dignity, creation must be appreciated for its relational value to humans.<sup>7</sup> By saying that humans must value creation intrinsically, instrumentally, for its sacramental capacity, and relationally, this necessarily means that *equal* emphasis must be placed on each of these modes of valuing. However, history demonstrates that many persons have largely looked to creation solely

for its instrumental value and that some have justified this through a distorted interpretation of the creation account in Genesis.<sup>8</sup>

In the second chapter of the book of Genesis, God sets the human person in the midst of creation to care for it as one tends a garden.<sup>9</sup> While this text of Genesis undoubtedly points to the special dignity and vocation of humanity, many throughout history have unfortunately misinterpreted the word “dominion”, used in the first chapter of Genesis and referring to the role of humans in relation to creation, as implying domination.<sup>10</sup> However, the word “dominion”, believed to be taken from the ancient understanding of how an Israelite monarch was to rule, would have been understood by the Israelites as the care and concern that a king demonstrates toward the subjects whom he is responsible for.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the word “dominion” must be interpreted in light of the second chapter of Genesis in which humans are instructed by God to “care for the earth” (Gen. 2:15). The fact that God establishes a covenant with creation further in the story of Noah and the Great Flood additionally demonstrates God’s special regard and love for creation and his intention that it be cared for and not exploited.<sup>12</sup> It is also important to note that God affirms his covenantal promises to creation in the subsequent covenants made with Abraham and Moses.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the prophetic books (especially Isaiah) speak to the dignity of the land and the care and concern that God has for it.<sup>14</sup> If God so values creation that God enters into a covenant with it, then, as humans fashioned after the image and likeness of the Creator, we have the moral and ethical obligation to do the same. The psalms and wisdom tradition also have a very important contribution to make in establishing a foundation for covenanting with creation and forming an ecological spirituality. The psalms, in addition to using many natural metaphors to speak of God’s presence in the world, likewise make reference to creation partnering with humanity in praising God.<sup>15</sup> The wisdom tradition for its part speaks to the deeply interdependent and relational character of existence.<sup>16</sup> While we could derive more support from the Hebrew Scriptures regarding the basis for forming a covenant with creation, for the sake of brevity we must now turn to the Christian scriptures.

The Gospels, while not specifically addressing the relation between humans and creation, nevertheless reveal through the teachings and miracles of Jesus that salvation includes all that constitutes human existence and not merely the human soul.<sup>17</sup> Since creation is an integral part of human existence and not peripheral, the salvation of the human person necessarily implies the salvation of all creation. Some Christians might be tempted to reject the notion that the world is saved by repeating the oft quoted phrase, “Christians are in the world but not of the world.” This phrase likely has its origins in portions of the Christian scriptures that speak of that world which is at enmity with God (e.g., 1 John 2:15). Yet how can Christians reject the world when “God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son?” (John 3:13). What is to be rejected by Christians is not the *created* world, which God loves and has indeed saved, but “*worldly*” attitudes which are opposed to God.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, when it comes to the *created* world which God looked upon in Genesis and pronounced “good” and likewise sent his only Son to save, we must declare ourselves unashamedly and resolutely to be both *in* the world and *of* the world. Another very strong support for the dignity of creation and its destiny comes from the beginning of John’s Gospel (John 1:1-5). It is perfectly reasonable to believe that if the Word (Christ) is the basis of all creation than creation must likewise share in the glorified destiny of Christ. The Gospels are by no means the only part of the Christian scriptures

that speak to the dignity of creation and its destiny, Paul likewise goes to some length on this topic.

### *Destiny of Creation*

One of the most critical aspects of the Christian tradition is the anticipation of Christ's return and the full manifestation of God's Kingdom. More specifically, the second letter of Peter tells us that we await "a new heaven and a new earth" where the righteousness of God will be fully displayed and at home.<sup>19</sup> The book of Revelation also refers to this "new heaven" and "new earth."<sup>20</sup> Likewise, the New Testament and the Christian spiritual tradition have long held that we are "pilgrims" and "strangers" in the world and are on a "journey" to our heavenly homeland.<sup>21</sup> However, while the spiritual notion of journey or "homelessness" has an important place in our tradition, these ideas along with others have given rise to the mistaken and environmentally destructive notion that this world is merely a "stage", "training ground", or "soul school"<sup>22</sup> destined to be destroyed in some great cosmic cataclysm immediately preceding the Lord's return. Based on what has already been said about the dignity of creation in the book of Genesis, it should be clear that our world is much more than a mere "stage", "training ground", or "soul school." Furthermore, any apocalyptic vision entertaining the incineration of creation *by God* is in direct contradiction to God's covenantal promise to creation made with Noah after the Great Flood and reaffirmed in subsequent covenants. This obviously raises the problem of how we are to interpret the apocalyptic passages of the Gospels and the Book of Revelation. While we cannot go into this in detail here, suffice it to say that the emphasis and "endgame" of these predictions is a new creation and not destruction. Furthermore, the idea of a "new heaven and new earth," which is originally mentioned in Isaiah 65:17, refers to the expectation within Judaism and Christianity that creation will be *renewed* and not *destroyed*.<sup>23</sup>

The notion that creation is destined to share in a glorious future finds support in the New Testament. Perhaps the strongest New Testament foundation for the idea that creation is destined to participate in glory can be found in three texts from the Pauline epistles which are described as "cosmic" because they bear testimony to the transformation of the entire universe in Christ.<sup>24</sup> In Romans 8:21, Paul states that "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."<sup>25</sup> Ephesians 1:9-10 explains "with all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." This passage makes it clear that all creation is to be "summed up" or given full and everlasting existence in Christ. Finally, Colossians 1:15-20 asserts, "Through [Christ] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross." These passages reiterate the notion that *all creation* has been reconciled and therefore is destined to be "summed up" in Christ. It is important to note that Paul's vision of all things being summed up in Christ and having a share in future glory is affirmed by the Second Vatican Council (see *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, number 39).<sup>26</sup>

The critical importance of considering the journey and destiny of creation is namely due to the fact that, if we follow Paul's line of argumentation, the journey and destiny of creation is identical to our own in the sense that it has been redeemed and is being taken up into Christ. Furthermore, what this entails is that creation can likewise be described rightly as a pilgrim like humans.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, this supports the idea that creation should be valued not only intrinsically, instrumentally, and sacramentally as an object, but should also be regarded for its relational value as *subject* and *genuine partner* of praise<sup>28</sup>, pilgrimage, and promise on the one journey to God.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Sacramental Basis for a Covenant with Creation**

Both the Old and New Testaments make extensive references to creation as a conduit or means of pointing to and manifesting the divine presence. In other words, creation is inherently *sacramental*. A sacrament broadly conceived is "any object, person, or event through which religious consciousness is awakened to the presence of sacred mystery."<sup>30</sup> The psalms bear strong testimony to the fact that those who composed them had their "religious consciousness awakened to the presence of sacred mystery" in and through creation. Many psalms use images taken from nature as metaphors to speak of God's presence and loving concern (see for example psalm 91). With regard to the Christian testament, some of Jesus' favorite images used to describe his experience of God's reign came from the world of nature. The transmission of the Gospel with its central message of God's Kingdom unfolding in our midst would have been severely impoverished were it not for images such as seeds tossed on a path, birds nesting in branches, a magnificent harvest, and the lilies of the field. Likewise, without the tremendous biodiversity of our world and the complexity and beauty of the various species that we so often take for granted, how could we and future generations have a sense of God's grandeur, majesty, and beauty? Creation promises to help lead us into ever deepening realizations and experiences of God's goodness. That is to say, creation has sacramental value in the sense it points us to the presence of God and can help manifest this presence by "awakening our religious consciousness to the presence of sacred mystery." Few theologians in the Catholic tradition have articulated the sacramental value of creation more poignantly than Thomas Aquinas:

For God brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and represented by them. And because his goodness could not be represented by one creature alone, he produced many different creatures so that what was wanting in one in the manifestation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided. Hence the whole universe together participates in the divine goodness more perfectly and represents it better than any single creature whatever (*Summa Theologiae*, 1.47.1)

This passage from St. Thomas highlights three very important notions regarding the sacramental value of creation: first, every creature is a manifestation and sign of God's goodness; second, God's goodness and beauty is most adequately represented by a multitude of diverse creatures (meaning that any dramatic species loss adversely impacts

the manifestation of God's goodness).<sup>31</sup> Finally, the entire universe as a rich network of *interdependent relationships* participates and mirrors the divine goodness more perfectly than any one individual or species alone. In other words, the quality and survival of religion is dependent upon the quality and survival of creation and the quality of the holistic human relationship with creation ("holistic" implying that humans have equal regard for nature's intrinsic, instrumental, sacramental, and relational dignity).<sup>32</sup> **To put it bluntly: the quality of our regard for creation precisely mirrors our regard for one another and our regard for God.**<sup>33</sup> However, creation as sacrament doesn't merely point us to the divine presence in the here-and-now, creation points beyond the present to the fullness of God's promise which is yet to be realized and for which *all* of creation ardently hopes.<sup>34</sup> Creation has the capacity to point to the fulfillment of God's promise of universal peace when humans, who must always be considered part of creation, make strides toward achieving lasting peace and reconciliation through fostering a solidarity and justice that includes all humans and every creature.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Basis for a Covenant with Creation in the Catholic Social Teaching Tradition<sup>36</sup>**

The Catholic social teaching tradition on the need to care for the environment has grown considerably over the past forty years as a result of concerns that creation and human relations have been adversely impacted by an excessive preoccupation with technology and development. While we cannot go into detail with respect to these teachings, it is important to highlight certain principles that form a comprehensive response to our ecological crises and therefore are essential to any Christian approach to creation. In addition to the concept of stewardship in regard to the human relationship with creation, Catholic social teaching tradition places a strong emphasis on preserving the integrity of creation.<sup>37</sup> The idea of the integrity of creation either directly or indirectly includes the four ways of valuing creation and two fundamental approaches to creation that establish the basis for this covenant. Additionally, these documents understand the integrity of creation to include not only creation and the human relationship with creation, but also describe how human relationships themselves play a major role in any adequate, holistic approach to creation.<sup>38</sup> In particular, Catholic teachings on the environment recognize that economic injustice between nations in the form of an inequitable distribution of earth's resources and a lack of solidarity between countries has resulted in poorer countries despoiling their environments out of a desperate attempt to scratch out a living, pay off national debts, and compete with developed nations.<sup>39</sup> Catholic social teaching has made it very clear that an adequate approach to preserving the integrity of creation must involve seeking justice in terms of upholding the dignity of the human person, seeking the common good, distributing or redistributing material resources more equitably, caring for the poor, establishing greater solidarity between nations, and ensuring that all people are able to participate in the social and political process. Therefore, in forming a covenant with creation, *we must also commit ourselves to covenanting with one another* in a manner which is more reflective of a deeply interdependent and related world that will only grow closer as a result of development and technology. Finally, contemporary approaches to eco-theology and eco-justice highlight the fact that any adequate attempt to heal creation and preserve its integrity

necessarily implies a thorough critique of all patterns of domination that exist in our world.<sup>40</sup>

### **Summary of Principles that Form a Basis for this Covenant with Creation**

Before moving on to a consideration of the practical steps that the Christian community must take in preserving the integrity of creation, we need to summarize the essential points that we have established. These essentials, grounded in scripture, tradition, and contemporary theological approaches to the environment, serve as the rationale and foundation for our covenanting with creation. To begin with, we believe that God calls us to value, care for, and celebrate creation in four primary ways: intrinsically, instrumentally, sacramentally, and relationally. When we place equal emphasis on each of these modes of valuing, we make great strides toward preserving the integrity of creation and exercising proper stewardship. Additionally, proper stewardship of creation is furthered when we regard creation as subject, servant, and sacrament. We have also argued that there is a sound scriptural basis for more than a stewardship of creation by humans (as important as this is). Hence, we believe that we are called by God to *partner* with creation.<sup>41</sup> Three ways that we are called to partner with creation is in terms of praise, pilgrimage, and in realizing God's promise to humans and creation alike in the various covenants that God has established.<sup>42</sup> We would like to propose, therefore, that preserving the integrity of creation requires an eco-spirituality which consists of four ways of valuing (intrinsic, instrumental, sacramental, relational), two approaches (as steward and partner) and three critical aspects to each approach (aspects of stewardship: to regard creation as subject, servant, and sacrament; aspects of partnership: to partner with creation in praise, pilgrimage, and promise).

### **Practical Application of Covenant Principles: Some Considerations Regarding the Development of Corn Based Ethanol as an Alternative Fuel**

At first glance the covenant with creation that we are proposing and the principles underlying it might seem a bit abstract. However, we believe that these principles can be used as a foundation and framework for practically shaping our interactions with creation. Let us consider the move in political and technological circles to begin converting corn into an alternative fuel (ethanol) and how the principles of this covenant might be used to consider whether this is appropriate. To begin with, we must value corn for its **intrinsic, instrumental, sacramental, and relational** value. In other words, we must always regard corn as having the following: value in itself as part of the web of life and as part of God's creation (**intrinsic**), value for being a food stock for millions of people and creatures (**instrumental**), value for the unique way in which it reminds us of God's presence as a source of nourishment and sustenance (**sacramental**), and, finally, value for the role it plays in nurturing relationship through creatures and persons gathering around corn to feed and socialize (**relational**). A proper stewardship of corn, following the three "S's" of stewardship, requires that we regard corn as a **subject** of God's enduring love and promise to sustain all creation, as a **servant** of the needs of creatures and humans, and, once again, as a **sacrament** that can alert us to the presence of sacred mystery. A proper partnership with corn requires that we bear in mind the three

“P’s” of the way that corn is a part of the one journey to God. Corn, like all creation, partners with us in **praise, pilgrimage, and promise**. Corn participates in **praise** through the strength that corn gives creatures to lift up their voices to God. Corn is a part of our **pilgrimage** as a food made especially sacred through the many relationships that corn has helped to cultivate between creatures and humans. Corn can finally be considered as destined to somehow mysteriously share in the **promise** of God to create a “new heavens and a new earth.” We believe that all of these considerations (and others no doubt), must be kept in mind and heart as we consider using corn as a fuel. The move to take a basic food stock for so many such as corn and to use it as a fuel will no doubt adversely impact the affordability and availability of corn. Without easy and cheap access to something so important to daily personal, social, and spiritual sustenance and growth, corn loses its **intrinsic, sacramental, and relational** value. Corn loses its **intrinsic** value when corn doesn’t participate as fully as corn could as a member of the web of life. Corn loses its **sacramental** and **relational** value when corn no longer is available to persons to remind them of God’s nourishing and sustaining presence and to gather them together around table. Having said all of this, it should be fairly easy to see how, without easy and cheap access to corn as a food, we cannot be faithful stewards of corn because it will lose its value as **subject** (having its own proper purpose and role as a basic food), its value as a **sacrament**, and its ability to **serve** the needs of all creatures. Finally, we cannot be in any kind of meaningful partnership with corn if it isn’t made available to all persons as a part of, and a means for, **praise and pilgrimage** to God and receiving God’s **promise** to “make all things new.”

### **Practical Steps to Realizing Promises and Obligations of the Covenant**

In an effort to build solidarity and a common approach to preserving the integrity of creation, the following practical guidelines for fulfilling the promises and obligations of humanity to creation have been taken directly from the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter is perhaps the most comprehensive and thorough statement regarding what the human community must do individually and collectively to avert further environmental harm and even disaster. The charter is an international document representing the collective wisdom of science, ethics, and religion and has been ratified by hundreds of thousands of persons. The guidelines that follow form a substantive foundation for the development of an ecological ethics that must complement any eco-spirituality. For more information on the Earth Charter, please go to [www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org).

#### **1. Protect and restore the integrity of Earth's ecological systems, with special concern for biological diversity and the natural processes that sustain life.**

- a. Adopt at all levels sustainable development plans and regulations that make environmental conservation and rehabilitation integral to all development initiatives.
- b. Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural heritage.
- c. Promote the recovery of endangered species and ecosystems.
- d. Control and eradicate non-native or genetically modified organisms harmful to native species and the environment, and prevent introduction of such harmful organisms.

- e. Manage the use of renewable resources such as water, soil, forest products, and marine life in ways that do not exceed rates of regeneration and that protect the health of ecosystems.
- f. Manage the extraction and use of non-renewable resources such as minerals and fossil fuels in ways that minimize depletion and cause no serious environmental damage.

**2. Prevent harm as the best method of environmental protection and, when knowledge is limited, apply a precautionary approach.**

- a. Take action to avoid the possibility of serious or irreversible environmental harm even when scientific knowledge is incomplete or inconclusive.
- b. Place the burden of proof on those who argue that a proposed activity will not cause significant harm, and make the responsible parties liable for environmental harm.
- c. Ensure that decision making addresses the cumulative, long-term, indirect, long distance, and global consequences of human activities.
- d. Prevent pollution of any part of the environment and allow no build-up of radioactive, toxic, or other hazardous substances.
- e. Avoid military activities damaging to the environment.

**3. Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.**

- a. Reduce, reuse, and recycle the materials used in production and consumption systems, and ensure that residual waste can be assimilated by ecological systems.
- b. Act with restraint and efficiency when using energy, and rely increasingly on renewable energy sources such as solar and wind.
- c. Promote the development, adoption, and equitable transfer of environmentally sound technologies.
- d. Internalize the full environmental and social costs of goods and services in the selling price, and enable consumers to identify products that meet the highest social and environmental standards.
- e. Ensure universal access to health care
- f. Adopt lifestyles that emphasize the quality of life and material sufficiency in a finite world.

**4. Advance the study of ecological sustainability and promote the open exchange and wide application of the knowledge acquired.**

- a. Support international scientific and technical cooperation on sustainability, with special attention to the needs of developing nations.
- b. Recognize and preserve the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom in all cultures that contribute to environmental protection and human well-being.
- c. Ensure that information of vital importance to human health and environmental protection, including genetic information, remains available in the public domain.

**5. Eradicate poverty as an ethical, social, and environmental imperative.**

- a. Guarantee the right to potable water, clean air, food security, uncontaminated soil, shelter, and safe sanitation, allocating the national and international resources required.

- b. Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.
- c. Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

**6. Ensure that economic activities and institutions at all levels promote human development in an equitable and sustainable manner.**

- a. Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.
- b. Enhance the intellectual, financial, technical, and social resources of developing nations, and relieve them of onerous international debt.
- c. Ensure that all trade supports sustainable resource use, environmental protection, and progressive labor standards.
- d. Require multinational corporations and international financial organizations to act transparently in the public good, and hold them accountable for the consequences of their activities.

**7. Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.**

- a. Secure the human rights of women and girls and end all violence against them.
- b. Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.
- c. Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

**8. Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.**

- a. Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.
- b. Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.
- c. Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.
- d. Protect and restore outstanding places of cultural and spiritual significance.

**9. Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.**

- a. Uphold the right of everyone to receive clear and timely information on environmental matters and all development plans and activities which are likely to affect them or in which they have an interest.
- b. Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.
- c. Protect the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, peaceful assembly, association, and dissent.

- d. Institute effective and efficient access to administrative and independent judicial procedures, including remedies and redress for environmental harm and the threat of such harm.
- e. Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.
- f. Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.

**10. Integrate into formal education and life-long learning the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life.**

- a. Provide all, especially children and youth, with educational opportunities that empower them to contribute actively to sustainable development.
- b. Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education.
- c. Enhance the role of the mass media in raising awareness of ecological and social challenges.
- d. Recognize the importance of moral and spiritual education for sustainable living.

**11. Treat all living beings with respect and consideration.**

- a. Prevent cruelty to animals kept in human societies and protect them from suffering.
- b. Protect wild animals from methods of hunting, trapping, and fishing that cause extreme, prolonged, or avoidable suffering.
- c. Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

**12. Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.**

- a. Encourage and support mutual understanding, solidarity, and cooperation among all peoples and within and among nations.
- b. Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.
- c. Demilitarize national security systems to the level of a non-provocative defense posture, and convert military resources to peaceful purposes, including ecological restoration.
- d. Eliminate nuclear, biological, and toxic weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.
- e. Ensure that the use of orbital and outer space supports environmental protection and peace.
- f. 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 all are a part.

## Conclusion

By ratifying this covenant with creation we seek to enter into relationship with creation as both stewards *and* partners. Likewise, we acknowledge the signs of the times regarding climate change and affirm that they speak to a deeply interdependent and related world which cries out for care, compassion, and healing. We hope to help the human community move into a phase of ecological transformation in which the interrelatedness and sacredness of creation is brought to the fore. We covenant with creation out of the firm conviction that scripture and the Christian tradition can play an integral role in this process of transformation.<sup>43</sup>

Above all, we covenant with creation out of the firm conviction that caring for creation is a non-negotiable and essential part of a religion that believes God became a part of creation through the incarnation of Christ. The implication of the incarnation of Jesus for Christian spirituality means that, like St. Francis, the patron saint of ecology, we are called to see God in all things and all things in God. We see God in all things when we continually reach outside of ourselves and strain with our physical and spiritual senses to encounter God in the “other” of our neighbor who is both our fellow human beings and all creatures, especially those who rank among the least. We see all things in God when, after having encountered our neighbor, we return to ourselves and discover that the presence of God and God’s way of seeing the world is becoming manifest in the depths of our inner life. In this fashion, the pendulum of encountering God in all and all in God swings to and fro in our personal and communal lives until such time that “God becomes all in all.”

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- <sup>1</sup> Bill McKibben, "Meltdown: Running out of time on global warming." Christian Century. February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007. 22-25.
- <sup>2</sup> Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1998): 914-915. Article 14 of the document *Gaudium et spes* (*The Church in the Modern World*) describes how the human person, in whom all of the elements of the material world reach their perfection, makes it possible for the world to be conscious of itself and therefore able to render praise to God.
- <sup>3</sup> John Hart, "What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology," What Are They Saying About Series (New York: Paulist Press, 2004): 53.
- <sup>4</sup> For support of the notion that all of creation has value in itself, c.f., Robert Faricy, Wind and Sea Obey Him. (Westminster, Md: Christian Classics, 1982): 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Michael Himes and Kenneth Himes, "The Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology." Commonweal (January 26, 1990), 42-49. One of the main points proposed by the authors of this article is that there is a strong basis in the Genesis creation account for humans approaching nature or creation as a partner.
- <sup>6</sup> Faricy, Wind and Sea Obey Him, 27. Faricy's approach to the notion of humans being created in the divine likeness is that God's image is enhanced and grows as humans become more humane in and through caring for creation.
- <sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II, *World Day of Peace Address: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation*. January 1, 1990. In article three of this address, Pope John Paul II highlights the importance of the relationship between humankind and creation.
- <sup>8</sup> Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crises." Science. Vol. 155, 1203-1207. White describes how part of the responsibility for the misuse and abuse of the environment is attributed to a misunderstanding of the creation account in Genesis and the distorted interpretation of the word "dominion."
- <sup>9</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, God in Creation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993): 30
- <sup>10</sup> John Haught, The Promise of Nature (New York: Paulist Press, 1993): 15.
- <sup>11</sup> Zachary Hayes, The Gift of Being (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001): 73; c.f., also Brennan Hill, Christian Faith and the Environment (New York: Orbis books, 1998): 40-42.
- <sup>12</sup> Bruce Metzger and Roland Murphy, The New Oxford Annotated Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) 12. The footnote for Genesis 9:8-11 describes the covenant that God made with creation specifically as an ecological covenant inclusive of every creature and the earth itself.
- <sup>13</sup> Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, "Covenant and Creation." Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches in Ecological Theology. Eds. William Eaken, et.al. (New York: Maryknoll, 1990): 27-53. In this essay Granberg-Michaelson explains the manner in which God has covenanted with creation in the covenants formed with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses.
- <sup>14</sup> For the critical importance of the prophets testimony to the dignity of creation, human's interdependent relationship with creation, and God's concern for creation, c.f., Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Biblical Vision of the Ecological Crises," Christian Century. November 22, 1978. 1129-1132;
- <sup>15</sup> Psalm 148
- <sup>16</sup> Denis Edwards, Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology (New York: Orbis, 1995). Edwards uses the wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures as a foundation in forming an ecological theology.
- <sup>17</sup> Hayes, 34.
- <sup>18</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 351 (New Testament). The footnote for 1 John 2:15-17 explains the use of "world" in a negative sense as "all that is alienated from God." See also the Second Vatican Council Document, *Gaudium et spes* (*The Church in the Modern World*), chapter 3, article 37 for support of this notion. For a description concerning the three ways in which the Gospel of John uses the word "world" c.f., Brennan Hill, Christian Faith and the Environment: Making Vital Connections, 79-80.
- <sup>19</sup> 2 Peter 3:13.
- <sup>20</sup> Revelation 21:1
- <sup>21</sup> Philippians 3:20
- <sup>22</sup> Haught, 89
- <sup>23</sup> C.f. the footnote on Revelation 21:1 in the Harper Collins Study Bible concerning a proper understanding of the concept of "the new heaven and new earth" in light of Jewish eschatology. Also see the footnote on 2

Peter 13-14, p. 347, in The New Oxford Annotated Bible for the idea that Revelation 21:1 implies the transformation and renewal of creation and not its destruction. The interpretation of the new heaven and new earth in terms of the renewal and transformation of the present creation is likewise strongly affirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, articles 1042-1050.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Mooney, *Teilhard de Chardin and the Mystery of Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964): 95-99. Mooney states that while scripture scholars do not know precisely what Paul intended to articulate in describing Christ's relationship with the cosmos, many scholars believe the so-called "cosmic texts" of Romans, Ephesians, and Colossians indicate that Christ's life, death, and Resurrection have redemptive implications for all of the created order (97).

<sup>25</sup> The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 218 (New Testament). The footnote on this particular passage confirms that what is being communicated by Paul is that creation will also share in glory. C.f. also, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 1046.

<sup>26</sup> C.f. also Robert Faricy, "The Christian and Creation: The Approach of Teilhard de Chardin." *The Teilhard Review*. 27.1. 1992: 14. Faricy, a professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, states that article 39 of *Gaudium et spes* affirms the intuition of Paul in Romans 8:21 that all creation shares in Christ's redemption and is likewise destined to share in resurrected glory. This notion is also discussed in *Wind and Sea Obey Him*, 11-12.

<sup>27</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 302. This article describes how creation is "on a journey" toward its destined fulfillment in Christ.

<sup>28</sup> C.f., Psalm 148:7-10 and *Gaudium et Spes*, 14

<sup>29</sup> For a description of St. Bonaventure's notion of the partnership between creation and the human person on the one journey to God, c.f., Ilia Delio, "A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Live in a Sacramental World." *The Franciscan Heritage Series*. Vol. II. (New York: St. Bonaventure University, 2003): 26-27. C.f., also, Zachary Hayes, "The Doctrine/Spirit in the Early Writings of St. Bonaventure." *Doors of Understanding: Conversations on Global Spirituality in Honor of Ewert Cousins*. (Quincy, Ill: Franciscan Press, 1997): 188-189.

<sup>30</sup> Haught, 76

<sup>31</sup> Haught, 76

<sup>32</sup> Haught, 77

<sup>33</sup> Faricy, *Wind and Sea Obey Him*, 36-38. Faricy gives an astute analysis of the interconnected nature of our relationship with creation, one another, and God. However, I would disagree with Faricy regarding his assessment that homosexuality as a mass movement is a sinful product of progress (38). It would have been far more appropriate to cite the scourge of pornography and the sexual objectification of the human person in general.

<sup>34</sup> Romans 8:22. C.f. also John Haught's *The Promise of Nature*. Haught emphasizes the critical importance of recognizing the promise inherent in nature for the formulation of any adequate and specifically Christian eco-spirituality and eco-ethics.

<sup>35</sup> Delio, 31

<sup>36</sup> The following is a list of references to Church documents which outline the Catholic concern for the environment: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, articles 299-301; 307; 339-341; 344, 2415-2418; on an appropriate understanding of eschatology and the scriptural doctrine of a "new heaven and a new earth" c.f. articles 1042-1050. Encyclical letters: *Populorum Progressio*, 23, 24; *Fides et Ratio*, 104; *Centesimus annus*, 37-38; *Mater et Magistra*, no. 196, 197; *Redemptor hominis*, 8, 15; *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 26, 29, 34. Apostolic letters: *Octogesima adveniens*, 21. World Day of Peace Message: *Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation* (January 1, 1990). The United States Catholic Bishops have issued the following episcopal teachings on the environment: *Renewing the Earth* (1991), *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good* (June, 2001). Additionally, there have been pronouncements on concern for the environment made by regional Bishops Conferences. The Heartland Catholic Bishops issued a document entitled, *Strangers and Guests: Toward Community in the Heartland* (May 1, 1980) in which they outlined Catholic principles of land stewardship. The Northwestern U.S. and Southwestern Canadian Bishops developed a list of considerations for community caretaking in the document, *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* (January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2001). For an analysis of some of the above documents and other important contributions made by various bishops

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conferences throughout the world on the subject of care of creation, c.f., Hart, What Are They Saying About Environmental Theology, 7-58.

<sup>37</sup> C.f., Pope John Paul II, *Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation*, nos. 7 and 8; *Centesimus annus*, no. 37; *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, no. 26; USCCB, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*.

<sup>38</sup> C.f., Pope John Paul II, *Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation*, no. 2; *Centesimus annus*, no. 38; USCCB, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*.

<sup>39</sup> C.f., USCCB, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*, "Caring for the Poor and Issues of Equity."

<sup>40</sup> Steven Bouma-Prediger, "The Greening of Theology: The Ecological Models of Rosemary Radford Ruether, Joseph Sittler, and Jurgen Moltmann." American Academy of Religion Series. No. 91. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995): 23-60. Rosemary Radford Ruether makes a strong argument for how the critique and conversion of the current patterns and systems of domination (i.e., the oppression of women and minorities, etc...) must be an integral part of any ecological theology.

<sup>41</sup> C.f., Faricy, Wind and Sea Obey Him, 15-16. Faricy argues that stewardship of creation or nature does not go far enough in adequately describing our relationship with creation. He argues that we must view nature as rooted in Christ.

<sup>42</sup> Hill, 289. Hill formulates a concise and clear basis for a partnership approach to creation that touches on the three aspects that I have proposed (partnership in praise, pilgrimage, and promise).

<sup>43</sup> For a relatively "reader friendly" book on how a deeper appreciation of the basic tenets of Christianity can promote ecological conversion, c.f., Denis Edwards, Ecology at the Heart of Faith (New York: Maryknoll, 2006).