

Some Reflections on the Stewardship of Creation

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Being Creative in our Response to God

Some years ago, when discussing the art of “sculpturing” with a professional sculptor, I asked him whether he already had a complete “idea” in his head when he began the actual work on the material. He said that he might have a general idea, but, usually, he first made a “clay” model, and, often when making that model, the clay, itself, would suggest some shapes and forms to him. He said that the material will, itself, suggest shapes and forms to the artist.

I began thinking of the biblical saying, “I am the potter, and you are the clay.” Perhaps, as the clay can suggest shapes to the potter, so, also, can we, in our own way, make suggestions to God about the shape of the kingdom. Is it not one of the wonders of salvation history, that God involves us, so much, in the whole process? The foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men.

As a wise father gives his son an opportunity to make suggestions, and, indeed, is even happy and proud, if his son does make good suggestions, so also, God invites us to work with Him in building the Kingdom.

Perhaps God gives us more freedom than we realise, with regard to how, exactly, we respond to His gift of salvation. We often talk of doing the will of the Father, yet, perhaps often, the will of the Father is that, while seeking guidance from the Spirit, we use our own ingenuity, and wisdom, in deciding how to respond.

If one is too detailed in spelling out what one expects in return in “covenant exchange”, then the freedom, and the ingenuity, of the other partner is curtailed. It is true that the general guidelines for Christian response are spelled out, and, again and again, we realise that the best “return” we can offer to the Father is Christ Himself, but there is still much room for individual freedom. And, rather than trying to discover exactly what God demands of us, by way of individual response, perhaps we should spend more time in ingeniously planning how to respond, and then discerning how this fits in with God’s plan of salvation.

We talk of “discovering the will of God”, but are we not also called to be creative in putting forward ideas and suggestions that may be within the will of God. Is it not, perhaps, the Father’s will that we use the intellect He gave us to try and put forward the best proposals we can for building up the kingdom?

In this sense, then, our covenant with God goes beyond our reconciliation. It leads us into active cooperation with the Lord. Our stewardship of creation, then, must, itself, be a creative stewardship. We do not live in a “zoo”. Our work with the Lord, in building up the kingdom, involves more than simply conserving “nature”, as we happen to find it now in the 20th century. Discernment is still called for. Together with God, our “Potter”, we discern the “shape” of the kingdom, as the “clay” in our own humble way, we creatively present possibilities.

This awareness of our creative partnership with the Lord, in building up the kingdom, gives deeper meaning to our “stewardship” of creation. This “stewardship” of creation is part of our ethical response to God.

Salvation and Ethics

At this stage, I feel it is necessary to pass some comment about salvation and ethics. In recent times, at least in the Catholic church, there has been a lot of attention given to ethical issues. On the “left”, Liberation Theology has, rightly so, brought social justice very much to the fore. On the “right”, controversies about abortion and contraception have focused attention on “sexual ethics”. Now, the new awareness on ecological issues is bringing forth more emphasis on ethics.

There is a danger in all this. There is a danger that the reality of justification in Christ becomes clouded by the emphasis on the ethical response to that justification.

We have been saved by Christ. That salvation does demand that we make a response to it – but we are saved by Christ, not by our response. There is a danger that, with all the attention being given to ethical issues, the message of the church will be interpreted as referring only to ethics, and the reality of the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus will become obscured.

We must make a response, yes. But unless the greatness of salvation, and the invitation to God is first proclaimed clearly, then we face the danger of slipping back into a type of Pelagianism, where we attempt to save ourselves by our own efforts.

While examining, in more detail, the type of response we must make, in issues concerning development, etc., we must, at the same time, be sure that we are proclaiming clearly the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus.

Awareness of the Importance of the Whole of Creation

Concern for the stewardship of creation theologically stems from the fact that the Christ-event was meant for the salvation of the whole world.

In the past, the focus on the theology of redemption was usually on the deliverance of the individual from personal sin. Yet, it would be inaccurate to assume that, until the present time, Christian theology had ignored the rest of creation. We need only look briefly at church history to be aware that concern for all of creation did manifest itself. We can take note that:

- Concern for all creation, which is “groaning in travail”, is present in the NT itself.
- In patristic times, the writings of Dionysus (Pseudo-Dionysus) presented a comprehensive cosmic theology, wherein the whole universe was seen as being part of God’s great plan of salvation.
- In the Middle Ages, St Francis is an obvious example of Christian concern for creation. Later, Nicholas of Cusa was a theologian, who also developed a cosmic theology.
- In more recent times, Teilhard de Chardin has written about the unity of the whole universe, and its part in God’s plan.

Today, circumstances are leading to a rediscovery of the fact that redemption should be focused, not solely on humanity, but on the whole of creation.

This has largely been brought about by an increased awareness of the importance of ecology. Evidence of threats to the environment have stirred up, not only our instinct for self-preservation, but also have rekindled interest in development ethics and environmental ethics. Perusal of periodicals and recent books, will reveal that environmental ethics is an issue very much in vogue.

Questions to be asked

In matters such as these, there are evident questions we can ask, e.g., concerning the mining of resources. Why are we in such a hurry to get all the

gold and copper out of the earth so quickly? Could we not mine at a slower pace, and leave something for those who come after us?

However, I believe that, at this stage, it is important for us, individually, to begin in our own backyard. It can be tempting for us to give a moral critique of the multi-national corporations. This draws attention away from how our own style of living might be affecting the environment. We must begin with an examination of our own style of living.

An ethics of environment can, indeed, apply itself to some of the greater issues of today. But, for us, it must also begin in our own backyard.

- Do we understand the environment we live in?
- Do we know how to “protect” it?
- Do we consume, without regard for future resources?
- How do we dispose of all the “waste” that we produce?

There is a continuous need for scientific research, in order to know how we can best care for the environment. There is a continuing need for us to inform ourselves about the environment. How do we achieve a balance between conservation and development?

Conclusion

In this brief reflection, I have tried to draw attention to:

- a. Our creative covenant partnership with God.
- b. The necessity of seeing ethical action as a response to salvation in Christ.
- c. The new emergence of environmental ethics.
- d. The importance of practising environmental ethics in our own backyard.

Personally, I believe that it is important for each one of us to explore, at greater depth, our creative covenant partnership with God. Becoming more aware of the freedom and dignity that God has given us, can help us to become more active in creative cooperation in building up the kingdom.