

Theology Runs Through It

Bishop's Columbia River stance pushes church to new level of environmental commitment.

Imagine, the US and Canadian Catholic bishops stating that the watershed of the Columbia River is a "Sacramental commons" not just for people but for all creatures: fish, plants, trees and all non-humans. In their recently released pastoral letter, the bishops call for a SACRAMENTAL UNDERSTANDING of the watershed and justice for all of its inhabitants, and call for us to develop a SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE COLUMBIA RIVER.

THE COLUMBIA RIVER WATERSHED: REALITIES AND POSSIBILITIES: is a reflection prepared by US and Canadian Catholic bishops (The Bishop of Nelson is the only Canadian Bishop involved, along with Fr. Pat Monette, a priest of his diocese and a member of the standing committee) on the Columbia River region in preparation for a pastoral letter (complete reflections is available on the project's Web site: <http://www.columbiariver.org>.) The Pastoral was released to the public March 1, 2001.

The Columbia River watershed includes twelve hundred miles of the great river known as the Columbia, the thousands of miles of its tributaries, and the 259,000 square miles of its extensive area. The Columbia River begins in British Columbia, flows in the U.S. from countless tributaries in Montana and Idaho, through Washington and Oregon, and stretches to the Pacific Ocean.

The Pastoral Letter invokes the majesty of the Columbia River and the romance of an area filled with natural beauty.

Also the unromantic environmental, social and political issues. The Bishops have come to grips with these issues, issues which include ravaged riverbanks, decimated forests, chemical and nuclear wastes oozing toward the river, decline of the salmon stocks, related cultural wars among First Nations and farmers and a variety of commercial interests, clear cut logging, the watershed becoming a battleground for competing interest, the violation of North American treaty rights that promise access to the river and its resources. These are some of the more important issues tackled in

the Bishop's pastoral. Of special alarm is the pollution from the Hanford Reserve in Washington, a building site for atomic and nuclear and chemical weapons since World War II and widely regarded as the most polluted site in the nation. Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, Washington, who heads the steering committee for the pastoral letter, states that the cleanup up costs for the Reserve will be between \$50 and \$60 Billion dollars.

There are specific proposals in the pastoral: providing financial support for family farms, developing and adopting new energy sources to reduce reliance on water and dams, ensuring justice for the region's poor, promoting responsible forestry practices, and combining conservation practices with restoration programs that provide new jobs.

"We hope that we can encourage a civil, collaborative dialogue" and "help people to reflect in a spiritual way on the problems of the river and exert good stewardship." Skylstad said. "In many cases environmental renewal is possible." Using the biblical theme of Jubilee Year 2000 - so proclaimed by Pope John Paul II as in keeping with the biblical mandate in Leviticus 25 that calls for periodic redistribution of resources - and describing the earth as a "SACRAMENTAL COMMONS," the letter insists that "respect for life needs to include all creation".

"This commons is not for humans alone," the bishops write. "It is intended by God to provide for all of God's creatures as they are in ecological relation." If the right ethical vision is realized, "people will recognize the inherent value of creation and the dignity of all living beings as creatures of God," according to the bishops. The Bishops define the common Good in a much broader sense than any pastoral letter has done before. Instead of talking about the common good in social, legal and political terms, the bishops use the term to refer to a both people and OTHER MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY, calling for a sacramental understanding of the watershed and justice for all of its inhabitants, persons, animals and plants, and call us to develop a spiritual relationship with the River. "We must allow the watershed to speak to us of God and where we are as a people have altered it so as to silence its teaching, we must restore its voice." the bishops write.

Bishop Skylstad said at a morning prayer service, "Nature has an integrity all its own, apart from human beings." He called for recovery of the "aesthetic, sacramental and spiritual appreciation of creation" and an

integration "of religious values" into the environmental debate. The new millennium, Skylstad said is "one of those crisis moments in human history...a crossroads in time when we must make critical decision" and bring "Moral Order: to the "public debate in ecology."

Fr. Thomas Berry, perhaps the foremost ecologist in the world today, describes what he considers our Great Work. Each of us has a work to do: teacher, farmer, logger, fisherman, housewife, etc. But in addition we have a Great Work, which we all must be involved in, and that is to make the Transition from our present technological civilization which is having a disruptive influence on the world to a civilization that will have a benign influence, so that the human community and the natural world can go into the future as a single sacred community in a mutually enhancing manner. We make this transition primarily through experiencing creation as a source of wonder rather than a commodity for our personal use.

It seems to me that is exactly what the Canadian and US Bishops have done and are doing in their pastoral letter: they are helping us to view creation, and especially the watershed of the Columbia River with a sense of wonder, telling us that all creatures have rights; that fish have rights, that trees have rights, that the river itself has rights to be respected and fostered by each of us. We cannot be ourselves without every other creature and being in the universe. The universe is by its very nature pushing for ever greater diversity, a deeper interiority, and a more intimate communion. The greatest blessing for any being is to be known in its sacred depths by every other being. Only this will lead to communion. As McLean ended his marvelous memoir, *A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT*, "...and in the end all things are one, and a river runs through it."

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