

## **Bishop's Dinner 09**

Dialogue between God and St. Francis

**GOD:**

Frank, you know all about gardens and nature. What in the world is going on down there on the planet? What happened to the dandelions, violets, thistle and stuff I started eons ago? I had a perfect no-maintenance garden plan. Those plants grow in any type of soil, withstand drought and multiply with abandon. The nectar from the long-lasting blossoms attracts butterflies, honey bees and flocks of songbirds. I expected to see a vast garden of colours by now. But, all I see are these green rectangles.

**ST. FRANCIS:**

It's the tribes that settled there, Lord. The Suburbanites. They started calling your flowers "weeds" and went to great lengths to kill them and replace them with grass.

**GOD:**

Grass? But, it's so boring. It's not colourful. It doesn't attract butterflies, birds and bees; only grubs and sod worms. It's sensitive to temperatures. Do these Suburbanites really want all that grass growing there?

**ST. FRANCIS:**

Apparently so, Lord. They go to great pains to grow it and keep it green. They begin each spring by fertilizing grass and poisoning any other plant that crops up in the lawn.

**GOD:**

The spring rains and warm weather probably make grass grow really fast. That must make the Suburbanites happy.

**ST. FRANCIS:**

Apparently not, Lord. As soon as it grows a little, they cut it-sometimes twice a week.

**GOD:**

They cut it? Do they then bail it like hay?

**ST. FRANCIS:**

Not exactly, Lord. Most of them rake it up and put it in bags.

**GOD:**

They bag it? Why? Is it a cash crop? Do they sell it?

**ST. FRANCIS:**

No, Sir, just the opposite. They pay to throw it away.

**GOD:**

Now, let me get this straight. They fertilize grass so it will grow. And, when it does grow, they cut it off and pay to throw it away?

**ST. FRANCIS:**

Yes, Sir.

**GOD:**

These Suburbanites must be relieved in the summer when we cut back on the rain and turn up the heat. That surely slows the growth and saves them a lot of work.

**ST. FRANCIS:**

You aren't going to believe this, Lord. When the grass stops growing so fast, they drag out hoses and pay more money to water it so they can continue to mow it and pay to get rid of it.

**GOD:**

What nonsense. At least they kept some of the trees. That was a sheer stroke of genius, if I do say so myself. The trees grow leaves in the spring to provide beauty and shade in the summer. In the autumn, they fall to the ground and form a natural blanket to keep moisture in the soil and protect the trees and bushes. It's a natural cycle of life.

**ST. FRANCIS:**

You better sit down, Lord. The Suburbanites have drawn a new circle. As soon as the leaves fall, they rake them into great piles and pay to have them hauled away.

**GOD:**

No. What do they do to protect the shrub and tree roots in the winter to keep the soil moist and loose?

**ST. FRANCIS:**

After throwing away the leaves, they go out and buy something which they call mulch. They haul it home and spread it around in place of the leaves.

**GOD:**

And where do they get this mulch?

**ST. FRANCIS:**

They cut down trees and grind them up to make the mulch.

**GOD:**

Enough! I don't want to think about this anymore. St. Catherine, you're in charge of the arts. What movie have you scheduled for us tonight?

**ST. CATHERINE:**

"Dumb and Dumber", Lord. It's a story about....

**GOD:**

Never mind, I think I just heard the whole story from St. Francis.

The beauty and grandeur of nature touches each one of us. From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine. Humans live within a vast community of life on earth. In the Jewish and Christian

religious traditions, God is first described as the Creator who, as creation proceeded, "**saw that it was good.**" God's love for all that exists was wondrously evident then, remains so now, and invites the active response of humankind.

To enter into ever-deeper relationship with God - this "Lover of Life" - entails striving to develop right relations with nature and with other human beings. But life on earth today is plagued with an unprecedented and accelerating ecological crisis. Deforestation, species extinction, climate change, ecosystem collapse, green house gas emissions, contamination of air and water, and soil erosion are just a few of the enormous ecological problems which we face in Canada.

God's glory is revealed in the natural world, yet we humans are presently destroying creation. In this light, the ecological crisis is also a profoundly religious crisis. In destroying creation we are limiting our ability to know and love God. *"The ecological crisis is a moral issue" and "the responsibility of everyone. Care for the environment is not an option. In the Christian perspective, it forms an integral part of our personal life and of life in society. Not to care for the environment is to ignore the Creator's plan for all of creation and results in an alienation of the human person."*

### **A Religious Response**

Throughout history, each people's religious beliefs have conditioned their relationship to their environment. Some Christians have developed the ecological acumen of saints.

Others seem to have misinterpreted the Genesis account to "subdue" the earth and establish "dominion" over all living things. Pope John Paul II has emphasized the need for "ecological conversion," and we ought to be encouraged that many Christian traditions are responding actively to the ecological crisis. They have recognized that churches have insufficiently come to grips with how aspects of Christian theology and tradition are implicated in the Western capitalist development model which has led to so much ecological ruin.

Christians are mining biblical and theological resources in order to gain insight into "eco-justice" issues. Others are collaborating by forming new ecumenical and interfaith alliances. The work to highlight a theology of creation that directs us towards the proper relationship between God and the entire earth community is most timely and appreciated, both within the churches and increasingly among environmental activists.

Sacred Scripture also teaches about an equitable distribution of resources, including sharing land, animals and water. This insistence on justice is often directed towards distributing the bounty of the earth and providing for those who are marginalized. The profound interconnection between God's care for humans and care for the environment is noted in Psalm 146, in which

***The maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them ...  
secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry ...  
sets prisoners free ...  
gives sight to the blind ...  
raises up those who are bowed down ...  
protects the stranger [and] sustains the orphan and the widow.***

Ecological problems are enmeshed within social structures that serve the interests of the few at the expense of the many, especially those marginalized and in poverty.

The call for a "new solidarity" should take into consideration not only the economic needs of all people but also environmental protection in order to provide for all beings and for future generations. The principle of the social mortgage on private property should include an "ecological mortgage" on the goods of creation for this as well as for future generations. The preferential option for the poor can be extended to include a preferential option for the earth, made poorer by human abuse.

As St. Paul says, "the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now," in the hope of being set free from its bondage to decay".

Environmental issues are more and more part of the agenda of governments, municipalities, industries, businesses and the media. More rational methods are being used to manage ocean, forest and earth resources. Industries are reducing their pollution emissions; municipalities are installing costly sewage treatment facilities. The percentage of waste recovery and recycling is gradually increasing. Growing numbers of individuals are agreeing to make personal efforts in favour of the environment, which include reducing highway speed limits, using public transit, decreasing and recycling waste, purchasing local and regional products, and lowering residential temperatures. Ecological awareness is emerging and becoming a fact of culture.

## **Embracing Forms of Eco-Justice**

All serious solutions to the ecological crisis demand that we change our thinking, relationships and behaviours in order to recognize the interconnectedness of all creation.

Our Christian tradition provides us with at least three inter-related forms of active response: the **Contemplative, the Ascetic and the Prophetic.**

### **The Contemplative Response**

Each one of us is called to deepen our capacity to appreciate the wonders of nature as an act of faith and love.

Take a look at the earth. It is beautiful beyond measure, beyond our wildest fantasies and dreams. It is intricate and elegant. It is sophisticated and complex; consider each leaf and snowflake from forever has been unique - what does all this mean. It is interconnected at every level.

We need to learn about the earth's history - estimated to be 4.4 billion years. We need to pay attention to evolution. It is fascinating to learn that all the scientific evidence points to whales evolving from terrestrial mammals and that the transition took some 10-15 million years to produce full aquatic, deep-diving whales with directional underwater hearing.

In the silence of contemplation, nature speaks of the beauty of the Creator. Standing in awe of creation can assist us to perceive the natural world as a bearer of divine grace.

Contemplation of the earth opens our awareness, changes our gaze, develops wonder and awe - a religious response to reality. Contemplation leads to reverence, and reverence leads to responsibility

### **The Ascetic Response**

Canadians are blessed with an abundance of natural resources, but we also are among the planet's most excessively wasteful inhabitants. Thankfully, there is in our tradition an ascetic response through which we can confidently adjust our lifestyle choices and daily actions to respect ecological limits, attune us to solidarity with vulnerable peoples, as well as encourage the movement of grace in our lives.

Rather than an attempt to "flee the world," a new asceticism would enable us all to enter more deeply into the planetary rhythms of restraint from the demands of consumerism.

To "fast" from actions that pollute, to embrace whatever inconveniences may arise from running a "greener" household, to decrease our use of fossil fuels and to tithe time, treasure and talent to environmental causes may all be aspects of this response. Buying locally produced goods, organic produce and fairly traded merchandise are increasingly realistic options for many Canadians. We can challenge the hold of the marketplace over our lives by conscious efforts to avoid over-consumption and by using our purchasing power to promote earth-friendly enterprises. The challenge is to live simply, so that others may simply live.

### **The Prophetic Response**

Prophets announce new visions, alternatives. They call people forward and unleash transformative energies. Prophets also dare to denounce and there are certainly lots of socio-ecological problems to denounce.

All social justice issues have ecological implications. The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one.

Ecological harmony cannot exist in a world of unjust social structures; nor can the extreme social inequalities of our current world order result in ecological sustainability. But the growing movements for eco-justice can contribute substantially to the necessary solutions for both crises.

***B16 "In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an opposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment***

*are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.”*

### **Conclusion:**

An old prospector shuffled into town leading an old tired mule. The old man headed straight for the only saloon in town to clear his parched throat.

He walked up to the saloon and tied his old mule to the hitch rail. As he stood there brushing some of the dust from his face and clothes, a young gunslinger stepped out of the saloon with a gun in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other.

The young gunslinger looked at the old man and laughed, saying, “Hey old man, have you ever danced?”

The old man looked up at the gunslinger and said, “No, I never did dance—and just never wanted to.” A crowd had gathered quickly and the gunslinger grinned and said, “Well, you old fool, you’re gonna’ dance now,” and started shooting at the old man’s feet. The old prospector in order to not get a toe blown off or his boots perforated was soon hopping around like a flea on a hot skillet and everybody was laughing fit to be tied.

When the last bullet had been fired the young gunslinger, still laughing, holstered his gun and turned around to go back into the saloon. The old man turned to his pack mule, pulled out a double barreled shotgun, and cocked both hammers back. The loud, audible double clicks carried clearly through the desert air.

The crowd stopped laughing immediately. The young gunslinger heard the sounds, too, and he turned around very slowly. The quiet was almost deafening.. The crowd watched as the young gunman stared at the old timer and the large gaping holes of those twin barrels. He found it hard to swallow. The barrels of the shotgun never wavered in the old man’s hands.

The old man said, “Son, did you ever kiss a mule’s ass?”

The young bully swallowed hard and said, “No, but I’ve always wanted to.”

The lesson for us all here:

Let’s not waste any of our precious ammunition, nor mess with one another.

We are called as co-creators to join God's work to repair some of creation's wounds which have been inflicted due to our ecological sins. It’s time to change things.