

Preaching Environmental Justice



Suggestions for Homilists

Right will dwell in the desert and justice abide in the orchard. (Is 32:16)

Homilists should not have to strain to preach environmental justice. It demands no great leap to move from the Scriptures to today's environmental concerns. The existing Lectionary already offers a great variety of opportunities for the homilist to address contemporary environmental issues out of our biblical and liturgical tradition.

Draw from the Lectionary and Liturgical Cycle

Our sacred texts are frequently quite attuned to themes of God's creation. We need only allow the Scriptures to speak directly to us to hear its words about creation. Rivers clap their hands, deserts bloom, and God clothes the fields of flowers. New Testament stories of stewardship, vineyard cultivation, and shepherding, not to mention parables taken from nature such as the mustard seed or the wheat that grows during the night, are easy lead-ins to preaching environmental justice.

The liturgical cycle likewise offers a variety of motifs from the darkness-to-light themes of Advent to the death-and-rebirth themes of Easter, which can open up reflections on the natural world and its place in the economy of redemption. The calendar of the saints and several "Masses for Various Occasions" found in the Lectionary also offer occasions to deepen a congregation's sense of humanity's ties to the natural world in God's one creation.

The Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi (the Church's patron of ecology), for example, offers a unique opportunity to reflect on how his widened heart grew from love for the poor to embrace all God's "little ones." Among the selections for the Mass for Peace and Justice, Isaiah 32:15-20 points to the bond between justice and the earth's flourishing. Lectionary selections for civil observances, such as Thanksgiving Day or Independence Day, also offer the homilist ample material for shedding light on the ties between justice and the integrity of creation.

Start with What You Know (Or Can Easily Learn)

First, a homilist has to set aside the unfounded fear that preaching about environmental justice strains Scripture or is out of keeping with liturgical themes. There may still be an unspoken fear that one must become an expert on many technical problems. To be sure, an educated layperson's knowledge of environmental issues is helpful; but there is much one can usefully say without pretending to be an ecologist or an expert in environmental policy.

A homilist can simply draw a congregation's attention to the immediate world around them: beautiful sunrises and sunsets, the life-giving nature of water, the beauty of clouds and mountains, but also the smog in the valley, toxic dumps in poor neighborhoods, strip mining in the local hills, or the sheer volume of a city's garbage. Without reaching beyond their own ministerial training, homilists can make links for the congregation with what the wider Church has been saying about environment as a moral issue. A good place to start might be our own United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral statement, *Renewing the Earth*.



The 1991 pastoral statement sketches several distinctive themes that may be of use to Catholic homilists. These include the following: (1) a sacramental view of the universe, (2) respect for human life, (3) the global common good, (4) an ethics of solidarity, (5) the universal purpose of created things, (6) an option for the poor, and (7) an ideal of authentic development.

Homilists can also do a service to the universal Church by acquainting parishioners with the

environmental concerns of the local church in other parts of the world. The Holy Father as well as bishops' conferences from around the world have made wonderful statements about environmental justice and climate change.

Still another aspect of preaching in this area is the introduction of broader themes of spirituality. Today's congregations are hungry for spirituality, and the young in particular find spiritual solace in nature. Leading people from their native delight in nature to "the Love that moves the stars" can begin to heal hearts that feel divided between care for creation and love for the Creator. Reflection on the humility of Christ or of St. Francis, to take another example, can be an occasion to insert a forgotten but much-needed Christian virtue into the making of a Christian ecological consciousness.

Make It Mainline

In today's busy world, people are grateful for a message that helps them to integrate their otherwise fragmented lives. Indeed, for many that is the immediate religious appeal of care for creation. Environmental justice cannot be just another "to-do" item to be added to a long list of unfulfilled wishes. Environmental justice will enter the hearts and minds of people only when it helps them integrate their lives.

The more environmental justice is linked to our reading of the Scriptures, to our worship, to our spirituality, to justice and peace work, and to our pro-life concerns—the more it is integrated into the whole of our life as a believing community—then the more it can be a source of renewal for ourselves and for all creation.

Some people may think they have to adopt some new "Creation Theology" or a new cosmology to be theologically correct on ecological issues. Others may object that to involve themselves in environmental concerns is to flirt with heterodoxy.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. Care for creation is at the heart of the Scriptures. Environmental justice is thoroughly embedded in the Church's social teaching, and it has been a repeated theme of Church teaching. See the new *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, particularly chapters four and ten (excerpts below are from these chapters).¹

The demands of the common good are dependent on the social conditions of each historical period and are strictly connected to respect for and the integral promotion of the person and his fundamental rights. *These demands concern above all the commitment to peace, the organization of the State's powers, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights. . . . Nor must one forget the contribution that every nation is required in duty to make towards a true worldwide cooperation for the common good of the whole of humanity and for future generations also.* (no. 166)

Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting a common good, *destined for all, by preventing anyone from using "with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate—animals, plants, the natural elements—simply as one wishes, according to one's own economic needs."* It is a responsibility that must mature on the basis of the global dimension of the present ecological crisis and the consequent necessity to meet it on a worldwide level, since all beings are interdependent in the universal order established by the Creator: *"One must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in*

an ordered system, which is precisely the 'cosmos.'" (no. 466, citing *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 34)

Responsibility for the environment, the common heritage of mankind, extends not only to present needs but also to those of the future. *"We have inherited from past generations, and we have benefited from the work of our contemporaries: for this reason we have obligations towards all, and we cannot refuse to interest ourselves in those who will come after us, to enlarge the human family."* This is a responsibility that present generations have towards the future, *a responsibility that also concerns individual States and the international community.* (no. 467, citing *Populorum Progressio*, no. 17)

When it comes to the environmental movement and various forms of creation spirituality, homilists can be guided by St. Paul's advice: praise whatever is good. At the same time, there is no need to accept every novelty, nor to listen to every assertion uncritically. Do not be afraid to point out differences or distortions.

As in much single-issue movement theology, there can be some ideas that are historically inaccurate and theologically unbalanced in environmental theology. Some creation theologians, for example, may reject the notion of sin. Yet the environmental crisis itself is one grand illustration of the enormity of sin's destructive power.

Large, varied congregations, like our Catholic parishes in the United States, are best served by integrating preaching on creation into the ordinary worship life of the parish and the living tradition of the Church, including contemporary Catholic social teaching. Preaching is a place for basics, and even well-educated, highly motivated audiences will respond positively to a simple homily that shows prayerful appreciation for the goodness of creation or the responsibilities of stewardship of the earth.

HOMILY NOTES FOR SELECTED
SPECIAL OCCASIONS

**Rogation Days: Readings from Liturgy for
Productive Land**

Readings: Gn 1:11-12 [Lectionary 851]
2 Cor 9:8-11 [Lectionary 852]
Mk 4:26-29 [Lectionary 855]

Background

Rogation Days were customarily the three days preceding the Feast of the Ascension in which prayers were offered for a bountiful harvest. While the observance has fallen out of use in urban society, it is still marked in some parts of rural Europe and the American Midwest. The rise of Christian environmentalism has stimulated new interest in this traditional observance.

Customarily, celebration of the Rogation Days involved, in addition to prayers for the harvest, expressions of contrition and Eucharistic processions with Benediction in the fields. The penance-petition structure is easily adapted to contemporary prayer services focused on environmental justice. (See previous.)

Homily Suggestions

Each reading in its way speaks of the goodness of God in creation. By itself, the Genesis text invites preaching on the goodness and variety of creation, a theme that is amplified in the Responsorial Psalm (104). In the Corinthians reading, God’s generosity in creation is invoked as a warrant for our generosity in good works; and in the Gospel parable, God’s secret action brings the harvest to fruition.

The Corinthians reading offers itself most readily to preaching environmental justice, since Paul is asking one community to share its abundance with another. A central theme here might be the solidarity of the human family by

virtue of creation and the duty of solidarity with those in need. (See Pope John Paul II’s *On Social Concern* and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ statement *Renewing the Earth* on solidarity.) God’s generosity in creation ought to serve as a model and warrant for our generosity toward the poor in their struggles for a good life in a healthy environment.

**Obligatory Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi,
Religious, October 4**

Readings (From the Proper of the Saints)
Gal 6:14-18 (Reading for the Memorial)
Mt 5:1-12 (Selection from Common of Holy Men and Women)

Note: While the Lectionary states a preference for using the readings of the day, the readings for the Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi may be used.

Background

By both official designation of Pope John Paul II and in popular usage, St. Francis of Assisi is patron of the environmental movement. While Francis tamed wolves, preached to birds, and wrote the *Canticle of the Sun*, he was above all a friend of the poor. Indeed, ecology-minded Franciscans argue that it was his struggle with himself to love perfectly the poor that gave rise to the humility in which he became a brother to all creation. For that reason, the Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi is an especially good time to address questions of environmental justice, particularly environmental racism and environmental injury to the poor.

Homily Suggestions

Francis was so devoted to the literal imitation of Christ that he received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ in his own flesh. The Galatians reading—“I bear the brand marks of Jesus in my body”—is an allusion to the stigmata. In Francis’s case, however,

this special grace was the fruit of a life given to the imitation of Christ in humility and poverty to the service of the poor and the outcasts of society. The Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi, therefore, is an appropriate time to make the case that an option for the poor stands at the heart of Christian environmentalism.

The second selection, the Beatitudes, is a thumbnail version of the Gospel as addressed to the poor and dispossessed. Each of the sayings is addressed to an audience that Francis, like Jesus, might have encouraged. Especially worth noting is “Blessed are the lowly, they shall inherit the land.” This text offers opportunity to reflect on the dispossession of poor people from their land in many parts of the world, a phenomenon that contributes to environmental degradation and swelling refugee flows. It also suggests an opportunity to explain the Church’s teaching on “the common purpose of created things”—the cornerstone of Church teaching on economic life, and a doctrine that demands equitable sharing of the earth’s resources by all people.

OTHER HOMILY IDEAS

Special occasion days like the Rogation Days or the Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi on October 4 are potential days to preach about environmental justice. However, it is also helpful to integrate environmental subthemes throughout the liturgical year as the Scriptures and Lectionary suggest. Caring for God’s creation is an ongoing mission, not just another subject for special observance.

Creating an Environment with Our God

Good homilists identify with their audience and become a “we” through their delivery and message. They are instrumental in creating an awareness of the sacredness of the moment, of the “here” and “now”—a time to encounter God. Homilies differ in winter and summer, morning and evening, rural and



urban settings. To be aware of people, place, and time is the most elementary form of environmental consciousness. Some suggestions may help deepen this experience:

■ Community Enterprise

The homilist does not have to be an expert on ecology. The homilist shares with all the vocation of healing a wounded earth. Preaching pulls in the experience of the community, and the homilist should reflect or mirror that experience.

■ Respect for All Creatures

Whenever speaking of human beings, the crown of creation, and plants, animals, and all of nature, do so with the deepest respect. We are all creatures of God



and must learn to live in harmony and peace. This sense of respect expresses the dynamic interrelationship that all creatures share with each other.

■ *Handling Controversies*

Certain environmental concerns can divide a congregation. It is best for the homilist to address a problem through a series of penetrating questions rather than suggesting a resolution—for example, connecting our faith tradition (Scripture and teaching) to an issue by asking how the tradition might impact or inform an issue. This allows for complexity and the need to consider different sides of the issue. Raising questions in an ever-deepening fashion over time is part of ongoing pulpit catechesis. Good preaching allows parishioners to share their thoughts in light of our faith and Catholic teachings.

■ *Gratitude*

The homily should express thankfulness for the rich gifts of God’s creation. Our awareness of the mystery and beauty of the web of life must be expressed in a variety of ways. Homilist and people together become more aware of God’s gifts of creation and together ask for forgiveness for the acts of environmental destructiveness and misuse of resources.

Making Holy Place and Time with Our Redeemer

Try frequently to begin your homilies with examples from the world of nature. These examples serve as a setting or composition of time and place, a special flavor for the religious theme to follow. Our liturgical prayer life is already rich with direct references to God’s creation, and the liturgical calendar reflects the seasons.

This practice of environmental awareness by the homilist highlights not only nature’s gifts, but also the propensity of human beings to misuse God’s

gift of creation in our everyday lives. Select vivid examples of God’s goodness and human misdeeds or healing based on the parish’s location/climate and the homilist’s creative imagination. Suggestions for some times and places follow.

■ *January*

Creeks, rivers, and other forms of moving water, including ice, manifest the flow of life itself. A gurgling stream or rushing river, even in midwinter’s rest, is the sign that new life is coming forth, even when it is not yet perceptible in a snow-covered landscape. Our life in Christ begins through the saving water of Baptism; since this is so, we have an obligation to protect and save the water. Water pollution is widespread, denying safe drinking water to millions.

■ *February*

Soil under our feet goes unnoticed, though this first foot of soil is where most living organisms dwell. The health of the fragile skin of our earth is of utmost importance. Humility comes from the Latin word for soil, “humus.” From and unto dust is the humbling message to each of us touched by the dust of Ash Wednesday. Soil is rich and fertile but also prone to erosion and pollution. Is not Lent an ideal time to learn how to care for the earth as well as to fast from certain treats?

■ *March*

The winds of March point to the power of God’s Spirit working in us. We need to listen and respond to the gentle breezes of the Spirit; but will we, or will we be too distracted? The rebirth of spring reminds us of the energy of nature so that we ask ourselves whether we waste or wisely use energy—electricity, oil, gas, etc. Can we and should we continue to use nonrenewable fossil

fuels, often with accompanying air pollution, at the rate we do? Or will the environmental ills we cause today call us in the future as a society to use environmentally benign wind and solar energy?

■ *April*

Lush and blooming vistas beckon us to take to the road and to explore. As we itch to go out and travel more in springtime, let us reflect on the mixed blessings. Interconnected communities and beautiful scenery are often coupled with air pollution, consumption of scarce petroleum, congestion, excessive mobility, and noise.

■ *May*

Flowers in Mary’s month tie us closely to the reawakening earth. The time of Resurrection and expectant Pentecost is one of buds, blossoms, wildflowers, and greening of meadows and lawns. Days lengthen and we welcome the warmth of



the sun after the long winter. Jesus is risen and is present in our midst, and so we rise and ascend with him. Gardens are among God's favorite places, and so we join millions of others in profoundly touching the soil and renewing our faith there.

■ *June*

Wildlife fills our life with joy and refreshment. Songbirds and birds of prey, squirrels and rabbits, butterflies and lightning bugs all carry a message worth discovering in early summer. Do we see and hear them, or do we overlook them, even despise them? Are they simply an annoyance, or do we come to know, love, and even serve these fellow creatures by providing protection and habitat?

■ *July*

We may be more aware of community relations in this month of Independence Day, visits, festivals, communal celebrations, and family reunions. Do our community and home exude hospitality and welcome? Are we able to welcome strangers into our community and open our social circles wider? Do we see connections between hospitality to people and to other creatures? Is there a connection between community relations and environmental concerns?

■ *August*

We may come to appreciate more deeply the various landforms (mountains, deserts, rock formations, valleys, and plains) during vacation time. They give us bearing, direction, and the geological history of our lives. This is the beginning of awareness of the "here" in our lives. The Feast of the Transfiguration shows us the "hereness" of the risen Lord, and the Assumption speaks of God's power to the blessed. While we can choose to extend the Savior's redeeming power to our wounded earth, we also can choose to withdraw from this awesome challenge.



■ *September*

Our buildings need to be winterized. Now is the time to think of energy conservation measures, adding caulking and painting, completing needed repairs, composting yard wastes, and protecting garden plants for late fall and winter. Do we regard our abodes as God's dwelling space, a sacred trust and healthy place? Do we cherish the abundance of space and use it properly as good stewards?

■ *October*

Trees declare their own sermon in brief autumn's painted landscape. We note their size and type and variety and beauty. Trees serve as symbols of the gift-giving aspects of our lives. Trees provide fruit, wood, climatic modification, wind and sun protection, prevention of soil erosion, and a host of other benefits. This is the time to plant trees and to prepare them for winter. Should we not give more attention to how our lives can bear fruit in Christ and in the protection of our forests?



■ *November*

The Thanksgiving meal is an American ritual. It is a great celebration of family and the abundance of our country, particularly its food resources. Whether we are from rural or urban backgrounds, we know the harvest time passes and the year draws to an end. Giving thanks to God is Eucharist, a heavenly banquet and the foretaste of things to come. We are not worthy receivers of this sacrament without the haunting knowledge of the poor nutrition for many in our country and famine in other countries. How can we respond to homelessness and hunger here in our own land and share our bounty with less fortunate people in poorer lands?

■ *December*

We turn our attention indoors with Christmas decorations and Yule logs. For most of us, the indoors makes up the part of our environment in which we spend the most time. It is also the most unregulated and can be the most polluted part of

the total environment—due to new home cleaning products and tighter ventilation. Consider a simpler home environment, where houseplants purify the air, where fresh air is plentiful, and where chemical products are limited and controlled.

The yearly cycle of twelve months can make us more aware of our human environment and should help us as individuals and as a community to conduct a monthly examination of conscience. The series of homilies—not just a single one—makes us always more aware that Christ, our Redeemer, shed his blood on this earth to redeem all of us and to bring creation to fulfillment.

Renewing the Earth: Reflections for the Liturgical Season

Ecological concerns are not only attitudinal, but practical. You can integrate these practical applications of introductory remarks, prayers of the faithful, or liturgical music. Each liturgical season offers an occasion for practical application.

■ *Advent*

Advent is the season of anticipation, expectation, watchfulness, and waiting. Prepare for Christmas with alternative gifts that challenge our excess affluence. Make donations to charity in the name of another, or give gifts to the institutionalized. Challenge family members to trim shopping lists and create alternative gifts that show their own hearts in the present.

■ *Christmas*

Christmas is the season of joy, warmth, family togetherness, and love. Do we enclose ourselves into our own narrow cocoon and forget the broader neighborhood? Are we aware that local problems extend to the wider environment as well? Do we find others in need and respond as the

Good Samaritan? Make time for prayer and quiet, realizing that all (youth and adults) need periods of reflection and their own private space.

■ *Lent*

Lent is the season of fasting, a time for restraint, sacrifice, giving up for others, recognition of wrong-doing, repentance, and confession. Is our community wasteful? Is it wrong to send waste to poor communities for disposal, or to refuse to accept waste from other communities? Are we wasteful personally—in eating too much, giving in to excessive fashion, overheating our homes, overusing electricity, needlessly traveling and driving our cars, not recycling, or using products that create unnecessary chemical and toxic waste?

■ *Easter*

Easter is the celebration of Christ's victory over death and the time of hope, rekindled faith, and new energy. The parish community should reflect

whether it can conserve more or simplify the parish's lifestyle. One way to do this is to conduct a resource assessment of the parish facilities, including not just the physical plant but also the grounds. Invite the community over time to develop a long-term parish resource conservation plan.

■ *Pentecost*

Pentecost is the season of growth and spiritual development. During this time, we extend our vision to the broader community. Begin to consider ways of resisting the destruction of our families and communities, the broader human family, and the rest of God's creation. In a particular way, we extend our love to our brothers and sisters who are poor and marginalized. Justice for the poor and care for creation go hand in hand.

NOTE

¹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2004).

The liturgy itself teaches us this, when, during the presentation of the gifts, the priest raises to God a prayer of blessing and petition over the bread and wine, “fruit of the earth,” “fruit of the vine” and “work of human hands.” With these words, the rite not only includes in our offering to God all human efforts and activity, but also leads us to see the world as God’s creation, which brings forth everything we need for our sustenance. The world is not something indifferent, raw material to be utilized simply as we see fit. Rather, it is part of God’s good plan, in which all of us are called to be sons and daughters in the one Son of God, Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 1:4-12). The justified concern about threats to the environment present in so many parts of the world is reinforced by Christian hope, which commits us to working responsibly for the protection of creation.

Pope Benedict XVI,
Sacramentum Caritatis [The Sacrament of Charity], 2007, no. 92
