

Geologist says Christian theology supports protection of the environment

BY PAUL A. BARRA
THE CATHOLIC MISCELLANY

COLUMBIA – A geologist whose main professional interest is the environment told a group of parish leaders on March 11 that “the doctrine of bodily resurrection implies that the whole universe will share in our ultimate destination.”



Jack Gelting

John R. “Jack” Gelting was trying to convince members of the Midlands Parishes Environmental Committee that Christian theology, and particularly Catholic theology, calls for protection of the environment, despite what he called “bashing” by ecologists.

“Plenty of arrows have been slung at the church by ecologists because of translations of the Bible, the human dominance theory,” Gelting said.

He quoted the Book of Genesis, which called on mankind to “subdue the Earth” and exercise “dominion over animals.”

He suggested that Catholics look to Book of Hosea to balance out the vision (When we sin and break our covenant with God, “the land mourns and everything that dwells in it lan-

guishes. The beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and even the fish of the sea perish.”) and to the tradition of the Church. Gelting even turned to one of Catholicism’s most intricate and difficult concepts to make his point.

“We’re not whistling in the dark about transubstantiation,” the scientist said. “It may be, according to the principles of physics, a sort of upward recycling.”

Catholics believe that Christ is truly present in the Eucharist, that the Communion bread and wine do not change chemically, but become substantially the body and blood of Jesus.

Gelting sees it, from an ecological perspective, as a transformation of wheat and grapes into bread and wine – and then, miraculously, into the body and blood of God the Son. He may have been pushing the conception envelope a bit with that one, twisting a doctrinal understanding so that it can be seen in another light, but there was no doubting his purpose. Gelting thinks that Catholic theology is actually nature-oriented.

“Nature reveals grace, has a sacramental characteristic about it, and there is a strong ancestral link to the Earth. We should view nature as promise, rather than perfection,” he said. “The theme of promise negates apocalypsm.”

Monastic men and women, he said, ‘exhibit concern for the environment by their asceticism, moderation, stability of place, humility and gratitude to God.’

John R. “Jack” Gelting

Gelting suggested that Christians read Revelation with the theme of promise in their minds. He also thinks that the Catholic Church is behind the curve with respect to her corporate concern for the environment. We should have caught on earlier that God wanted us to protect his creation, nature, on the basis of his covenant with Noah.

That proves, according to Gelting, that “we all share in God’s creation. God will redeem not only us, but all of his creation with us.”

The Catholic Church is catching up, however. We even have a patron saint of the environment, Francis of Assisi. Gelting cited recycling efforts at St. Thomas More and other parishes; the Peninsula Cluster advertising each parish’s liturgies in all parish bulletins, a way to cut down on vehicular travel; and the example of monasteries.

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One of the tenets of Catholic social teaching is Care For the Environment. Gelting said that we can be good stewards of God’s creation by embracing three principles for the common good – authentic development of resources, including sustainable development and striking a balance between spiritual and material needs; moderation; and sacrifice.

He suggested also that parents expose their children to outdoor activities more as a way of getting them to love nature.

Julia Sibley-Jones, a visitor to the meeting from the Christian Action Council, agreed. She said that being out in nature can be a spiritual and soul-calming experience.

“To be out there is a different way of listening, a different pace,” Sibley-Jones said.

Jack Gelting is an environmental hydrogeologist with the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. He is a member of St. Thomas More Parish on the campus of the University of South Carolina.

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Jack's Note:

What I said about transubstantiation is that “even modern physics, with its acceptance of open systems and the chaos theory, can be reconciled with the concept of transubstantiation.”

The “upward recycling” comment was in the context of biologist Rudy Mancke’s teaching that organisms recycle other life forms into higher beings.