

Brother Fire, Sister Water...Respecting the Environment  
September/October 2005

**What is meant by simplicity of life? Living by the conviction that we are stewards of the earth, not its masters.**

During my vacation this year, I spent a week visiting my former mission in the northern desert of Peru. While I was paying a visit to La Bocana, a poor fishing hamlet of the parish, located on the Pacific Ocean, Sister Martha took me to the oil rigs that an international petroleum conglomerate had recently installed. For the moment they're extracting only four trucks of crude oil per day. Within a year the quota is expected to reach 200. By that time, I fear that the villagers will be forced to move elsewhere. You see, the local authorities signed a five-year contract with the oil firm, leasing the land surrounding the village for a mere \$15 per acre a year. I suspect that the value of the crude, once refined, will reach the millions.

I was reminded of my visit to La Bocana when I read the lead editorial, Roots of the oil crisis, in the Aug. 16 issue of the Florida Times-Union. The editor based his commentary on a new book Beyond Oil by Kenneth Dreffeyes, a geologist and professor emeritus at Princeton University. According to Dreffeyes, world oil will peak this year. It is going to be very difficult for the United States to stand up to an international bidding war for the remaining oil and natural gas. Dreffeyes lays the blame for the looming oil crisis on our failure to heed earlier warnings about a global oil peak. Meanwhile, we continue to feel the effects of the oil crisis locally as the price for a gallon of regular hovers around \$2.70.

Professor Dreffeyes makes a number of concrete suggestions for confronting the crisis, like using wind turbines, nuclear power plants, bio-fuels from crops, etc. Rather than comment on his suggestions, I want to focus our attention on something more general, and perhaps, much more important: simplicity of life.

What is meant by "simplicity of life" Living by the conviction that we are stewards of the earth, not its masters. Unfortunately, most of us in first world countries live like masters of the earth, with little concern for how our behavior might affect future generations and the environment.

We in the United States, with less than 5% of the world's population, consume 30% of its non-renewable resources. Eight percent of the world's population owns a car. What would happen if 20% owned a car? The average American consumes five times as much grain products and 60 times as much fuel as a citizen in India. What would be the result if the one billion people of India demanded and received as much grain and fuel products as we Americans consume?

Indeed, if everyone throughout the world acted to protect the environment on the local level, we would have taken a giant step towards protecting the global ecosystem.

Simplicity of life cannot flourish in an atmosphere of consumerism. Driven by shrewd advertising, consumerism causes us to live beyond our means. The result is that we accumulate so many things that we have to rent special pods to store them. Did we really need them? No. Then why did we buy them? Modern advertising causes us to confuse desires with needs. And

the aggressive nature of advertising aimed at children today is guaranteeing the subtle indoctrination of future generations.

How does one combat both globally and locally the wrongs that consumerism is inflicting on the limited resources of our planet? On the global level, we should insist that our elected officials enact and enforce laws that protect the environment. Get involved. Write to your representatives. Ask why our government is investing so much money in nuclear weapons laboratories, while at the same time insisting that other nations forgo their nuclear programs.

But if we're going to wait for the government to take effective action to protect the environment, it may be too late. Therefore, let's marshal our efforts on the local level now. Indeed, if everyone throughout the world acted to protect the environment on the local level, we would have taken a giant step towards protecting the global ecosystem. For every human act affects the environment to some degree. If we all developed habits that respected the environment, the problem would be largely solved. As Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the German poet once wrote, If everyone swept in front of his own door step, the whole world would be clean. For starters, here are a few suggestions:

- Turn off lights. Use energy-efficient bulbs.
- Make your next vehicle a fuel efficient one.
- Slow down. Every five miles over 60 mph adds 20 per gallon.
- Limit your use of paper/plastic cups, plates, etc.
- Limit purchases to your needs, not your wants.

For those readers wondering what my message this month has to do with our faith, recall what Jesus did after he had fed the hungry crowd by multiplying the five barley loaves and the two fish. He sent his disciples through the crowd, telling them: Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted. (Jn. 6:12). Recall, too, how our beloved Francis of Assisi in his Canticle of the Sun referred to the lower forms of creation: Brother fire Sister water Mother Earth.

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