



TAKING CARE OF GOD'S CREATION

by Lawrence Radice, M.M.

**Maryknoll missionaries see stewardship of the earth
as moral imperative**

As a young priest in Africa, I was arrested for taking a picture of a tree.

At the police station, I was asked why I had taken a picture of a secret military base. I didn't know I was taking a picture of a secret base, I explained. I thought I was just taking a picture of a tree. The interrogating officer scoffed and said, "What does a priest care about a tree?"

Some 20-plus years later, I am still trying to explain to people why everyone, not just priests, should be concerned about the environment. Luckily for me, the chief of police was raised a Catholic, and was willing to listen as I explained that all



Scarred earth
Slash and burn farming erases forest in East Timor. Previous page, smoke rises from coal-fired power plant on banks of the Ohio River in New Haven, W.Va.

people, especially Christians who were raised to know that God created the heavens and earth, must understand that all God's creation is good (Gen.1). Through the works of the Creator we can begin to know the Creator. I planned to use the tree photo to teach farmers and schoolchildren to care for the land through planting and caring for trees.

As a college student I earned my bachelor's degree in science, and as a seminarian I got my master's degree in theology, so I am programmed to see the divine in the natural world. This is not just my view, however. It is important Catholic teaching—one of the seven social teachings of the



Church—and it is central to many of the works of Maryknoll missionaries, who, like me, see the impact of environmental degradation and climate change on the poor and less fortunate people we serve, whether one believes these changes are man-made or just cyclical.

Working with farmers in Africa led me to work with fruit farmers in Thailand whose orchards were dying from root fungal infections. Lay Missioners William and Kathleen Do-





erner and I determined that the Thai farmers' extensive use of herbicides had destroyed the natural ecological balance within the soil. We began programs that helped them to rebuild their soil to a much healthier condition.

Now, I have been in China for 12 years, and my work with farmers is much less direct since it is restricted by the government. However, two years ago I was invited by Maryknoll Father John Brinkman to attend a meeting of the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Tianjin, China. Father Brinkman has been involved with these meetings since the landmark conference on climate change in 1997 that adopted the Kyoto Protocol to limit greenhouse gas emissions. After I returned from the conference in Tianjin, one of the people from our local Catholic Church asked, "Why did you attend that meeting? The Church doesn't have anything to do with climate change."

That comment echoed the African policeman's skepticism decades earlier and it caused me to think that as a Church, we Catholics may not have done too well connecting our experience of creation with the Creator! The words of Psalm 19 come to my mind, "The heavens

declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of God's hands." We have to consider, too, the work of our own hands in causing environmental damage and what we can do to mitigate that.

While some people debate the credibility of human-induced climate change, since 2007 the United Nations has recognized it as a reality, saying climate change is "human-made, definitely happening," and that the collective global effort so far to keep greenhouse gases to a "safe" level has been grossly insufficient, citing, among other evidence, "an unusual number of severe weather-related disasters, and at the head of an almost unbroken series of the hottest years on record."

As an attendee at the recent U.N. Climate Change Conference in Durban, South Africa, I predict the world will start hearing two words more and more: "adaptation" and "mitigation." That is to say, how we adapt to climate change and how its effects can best be mitigated. Climate change will affect everyone, but it is the poor, especially women and children, who will suffer first. In fact, they already are being impacted.

I found the conference, at best, a limited success. In

Lush jungle
The lush growth of dense jungle in Guatemala provides a stark contrast with the image of burned off forest on previous page.

view of the inertia on the part of secular organizations and governments, I have to ask myself, "How can/should the Church respond? And what can I do in my ministry to respond better?"

I have only to look at the mandate from the very Maryknoll Society to which I belong as a priest. At our last governing chapter meeting in 2008, we were called upon by our leadership to "integrate into our personal lives, our ministries and our Society, the proper stewardship and care of the earth."

All three branches of Maryknoll missionaries—the Fathers and Brothers, the Sisters and the lay missionaries—have made clear the importance of caring for God's creation in their ministries around the world and at home. In blunt words, speaking with one voice, the three have said, "We are one humanity interconnected with all matter on a tiny planet within a vast, expansive universe. We are challenged now to act quickly to rescue Earth and its inhabitants from destruction and extinction."

Maryknoll Sister Ann Braudis, who also was at the conference in Durban, says, "Linking respect for human life and responsibility for the environment have emerged over recent years as the foun-



S. Sprague/Myanmar

ation for moral behavior." This was clear, she says, from the onset of the conference at Durban. (See *World Watch* on page 20.)

She adds, "Global warming has begun a relentless process of altering the climate of the earth in such a manner that widespread hardship is being inflicted on many people, particularly in Africa, low-lying delta areas and small islands. Before this reality, no person and no nation can assume indifference.



Moral rectitude requires the defense of life and, consequently, the protection of life-support systems.”

If we as Catholics need direction on the issue of caring for our temporal home, we need turn to no higher authority than Pope Benedict XVI, who has been called the Green Pope and has spoken of the planet’s “urgent need of caring stewardship.”

For me, the metaphor of the earth as mother is apt. She gives us life, nourishes

us and provides all we need. And if our very own biological mother is sick, even if we cannot say with 100 percent certainty what is causing her illness, we would at the very least treat the symptoms and try to stop what we know is harming her. Do we owe any less to Mother Earth? ✚

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Teaching care
Father Radice, who uses his science background to promote holistic agriculture, works with students in Myanmar.