

Caring for God's Creation

Resources for Liturgy, Preaching, and Taking Action

EXCERPTS

USCCB, Committee on Justice, Peace, and Human Development

Preaching Environmental Justice: Suggestions for Homilists

DRAW FROM THE LECTIONARY AND LITURGICAL CYCLE

Our sacred texts are frequently quite attuned to themes of God's creation. Scripture speaks 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. ...

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 person'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 low-income 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. ...

Still another aspect of preaching in this area is the introduction of broader themes of spirituality. Today's congregations are hungry for spirituality, and many people 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. ...

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 that environmental justice is linked to our reading of the Scriptures, to our worship, to our spirituality, 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. ...

OTHER HOMILY IDEAS

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 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 is one way to begin. 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.

HOMILY NOTES FOR SELECTED SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi (October 4)

Background: By both official designation of Pope John Paul II and popular usage, St. Francis of Assisi is patron of care for God's creation. While Francis tamed wolves, preached to birds, and wrote the Canticum of the Sun, he was above all a friend of the poor. Indeed, ecology-minded Franciscans argue that it was his struggle to love persons in poverty perfectly 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: St. Francis was so devoted to the literal imitation of Christ that he received the stigmata, the wounds of Christ in his own flesh. 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 those who are poor and marginalized in society. The Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi, therefore, is an appropriate time to make the case that an option for those who are poor stands at the heart of Christian environmentalism.

Among the choices for Gospel readings in the Lectionary's Common of Holy Men and Women is the beginning of Matthew 5: the Beatitudes, a thumbnail version of the Gospel as addressed to those who are 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 meek, for they will inherit the land." This text offers opportunity to reflect on the dispossession of those who are poor 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" – a cornerstone of Church teaching on economic life, and a doctrine that demands equitable sharing of the earth's resources by all people.