

Poverty & Environmental Justice in Franciscan Perspective
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The Franciscan Family takes its agenda for social engagement from our founder, St. Francis, who is the patron saint of peace, ecology, and the poor. Our work in these areas is an expression of our identity as followers of the Gospel in the world today. A major component of our advocacy is to help others develop a Franciscan perspective, not just on individual issues but on a broad agenda of compassion and safeguarding human dignity. In this chapter we explain how poverty, justice and environmental protection are linked in the Franciscan tradition, and illustrate a example of how engaging both issues from a Franciscan Catholic perspective has the potential to animate more people to civic engagement. The first part of this chapter will describe the development of Catholic theologies of environmental justice, and the second will explain and narrate our participation in a regional environmental justice initiative in California's Great Central Valley.

At the outset, however, a brief explanation of why we feel a chapter about the environment merits inclusion in a book about best practices in poverty eradication. At its core, poverty results from the lack of access to the resources necessary for a life of dignity. Improving wages and providing an adequate social safety net are fundamental components of poverty eradication, but economic income alone does not guarantee freedom from poverty. As our case study will show, addressing the sum total of environmental conditions may be required as well. Tackling air pollution, inadequate water infrastructure, and insufficient housing stock are social justice issues, but also issues of human ecology. In California's Central Valley, these problems are exacerbated by racism and anti-immigrant bias, all within an hour's drive from some of the wealthiest cities in the world. California needs a sustainable development strategy just as much as Africa. Here we suffer from over-development, or mal-development: tremendous economic growth has benefited many, but millions have been left behind in this economy. The poor are further marginalized as environmental resources are exploited for the privileged, but air quality deteriorates, providing a further injustice. Human society does need to exploit environmental resources to support itself, but the distribution of pollutants and the degradation of resources usually impacts the poor much more heavily. From a Franciscan perspective, the poor have a right to development, but our advocacy must be very clear: it must be a wise form of development, an equitable, sustainable development, at both regional and international scales.

The emergence of a Catholic ethic of environmental justice

Il poverello was named patron saint of those who "promote ecology" by Pope John Paul II in 1979.¹ Despite a widely held popular perception of St. Francis as a model for environmental advocacy, the Franciscan Family has committed astonishingly few

resources to this critical task. Analyzing and correcting this shortcoming in Franciscan praxis is beyond the scope of this chapter, but we do feel it is important to provide some theological foundation for an integrated approach to advocating for the poor and the environment.² With his World Day of Peace Message about the environment in 1990, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II launched a flurry of interest in matters environmental among Catholic theologians. John Paul II rooted his environmental theology in the stewardship ethic of Genesis, and linked it with his vision for solidarity with the poorest on this planet. He carried forward a vision for distributive justice of the earth's resources for everyone, initiated by Pope Leo XII in *Rerum Novarum* and affirmed by the major statements of Catholic social teaching for the past century. More than anyone else, Pope John Paul II conferred legitimacy on Catholic concern for the environment.

The power of capitalism and technology has made unprecedented resource exploitation possible. In North America, conventional environmentalism and popular perceptions have posed environmental protection (especially wild areas and habitat) to be in tension with economic development. Media narratives and popular perception recount how resource exploitation and pollution are inevitable consequences of job creation and economic growth.

Over the past 20 years, however, an alternative approach has emerged, linking social justice and environmental protection. Its advocates carry forward a progressive agenda from the civil rights, labor rights, and community organizing movements. This approach critiques conventional environmentalism as reproducing the discrimination of broader US society, and failing to acknowledge the disproportionate impact of pollution on economically and politically marginalized communities. Frequently these are communities of color, already suffering from poor housing, failing schools, and inadequate job opportunities. A disproportionate burden of pollution adds further injury to the injustice they suffer. To emphasize the centrality of equity issues in this agenda, movement leaders named their approach Environmental Justice, or EJ.³

The EJ movement grew out of these other historical social movements for justice, and its integrated vision grew as scholars began to describe the common patterns of injustice suffered by inner city African Americans, Native Americans on reservations, and rural Mexican Americans (especially farmworkers and rural communities).⁴ During the 1980s and 1990s, the EJ movement focused most of its efforts on local, urban initiatives to address toxic waste disposal and workplace hazards (including pesticides). Scholars played a critical role in framing these local initiatives as a national movement, and some Protestant churches conferred legitimacy, especially the United Church of Christ and African American congregations that had been active in civil rights efforts.⁵ By the mid-1990s, the EJ movement had established its alternative environmental agenda with an explicit focus on the needs of poor communities. Several scholars have subsequently expanded the EJ framework to an international scale.

Pope John Paul II's *The Ecological Crisis* was substantially echoed by the US Bishops' conference in 1991 with their *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*.⁶ Coming just five years after

their major economic justice pastoral letter, the US Bishops presented its vision of a distinctly Catholic contribution to environmental concerns. In keeping with John Paul's vision, it presents Biblical and sacramental visions of stewardship, reflecting a Biblical vision of justice. More than other statements, it emphasizes continuity between economic justice and environmental justice, meaning solidarity with the economically marginalized who suffer disproportionate environmental impacts. *Renewing the Earth* proposed a distinct Catholic environmental ethic, drawn from the Church's social teaching tradition. It lays out familiar social teaching themes from which to fashion an environmental ethic: a sacramental universe, a consistent respect for human life, common good, solidarity, universal purpose of created things, and an option for the poor. By 1996, forty eight conferences of bishops worldwide had written statements addressing specific, regional environmental problems from the perspective of Catholic theology, with a special emphasis on just distribution of resources for the poor.⁷

At the national level, the US Bishops established an environmental justice program to assist parishes and dioceses who wanted to conduct education, outreach and advocacy about these issues.⁸ The most interesting and effective expressions of Catholic environmental justice concern have been regional initiatives. These have quite deliberately integrated economic development, distributive justice, and common good concerns. US Bishops do not want Catholic environmental concern to be perceived as distinct or deviating from their broader strategy of presenting social teaching to the faithful and society.

These regional initiatives assume greater power because they apply social teaching principles to specific economic and environmental conditions, and because they facilitate participation by concerned lay Catholics. In 1996, the Catholic Bishops of Appalachia wrote *At Home in the Web of Life* to propose the creation and defense of "sustainable communities" as a task for the Catholics and people of this region. Appalachia has long been treated as a resource colony, and this letter proposes a vision of sustainable forests, agriculture, families, livelihoods, spirituality, and communities. The best known regional environmental pastoral letter was created by the bishops of the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia and Alberta in 2001, *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*.⁹ These bishops banded together based on the region surrounding the Columbia River. This letter proposes a ten-point action plan, including the promotion of "justice for the poor, linking economic justice and environmental justice." Several other regions of bishops have issued shorter and less ambitious pastoral letters on the environment, usually re-stating core Catholic social teaching principles as they apply to environmental concerns. Common themes include a call for better stewardship of the earth, more authentic models of economic development, and attention to the crisis in agriculture and rural communities.

Race, poverty and the environment in California's Central Valley

California's Central Valley hosts many environmental injustices. The health of its environment has been seriously damaged by the region's polluting industries, causing long term negative impacts on the valley's citizens. Likewise, a highly stratified

distribution of wealth among the valley's citizens puts the poor, mainly minorities and communities of color, poses serious obstacles for them to protect their environmental health. These many immigrants and minorities do not have the resources to cope with pollution-induced health problems. This section describes the environmental justice issues in the Central Valley and Catholic efforts to address them.

California's Central Valley Region, known as "America's Breadbasket," the home of an annual US\$ 27 billion agricultural industry which supplies one quarter of the nation's food. It stretches some 450 miles long, bordered by the Cascade Range to the North and the Tehachapi Mountains to the south and ranges from 40 to 60 miles wide, enclosed by the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east and the Coastal Ranges to the West. It is adjacent to some of the most prominent cities in the world, including Los Angeles and San Francisco, and contains some of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States.¹⁰ However, this economic and demographic growth takes a heavy toll on the region's natural environment and human residents. Environmental injustices can be classified as acute (severe, striking) and chronic (of long duration, less visible but no less harmful).

Several examples of acute environmental injustice stand out in the valley. In each of these instances the poor and socially marginalized suffer due to inaction by public officials. While these individual occurrences of environmental injustices are more likely to draw attention, it is the long term, or chronic, problems (many of them the root causes of these acute instances) which do the most damage. A famous example of air quality injustice in the valley was the Westley tire fire of 1999. Seven million used tires improperly and illegally stored in the hills surrounding the towns of Westley and Patterson caught fire after being struck by lightning. The fumes of the burning tires released poisonous chemicals into the air, including mercury, heavy metals, particulate matter, and some of the most dangerous carcinogens known to man, dioxins. Authorities originally claimed the fire was impossible to put out, and was going to let burn out on its own, taking at least a year. It was only community grassroots action, led by the husband and wife team of John and Rosenda Mataka, which forced authorities to extinguish the blaze. Even though the tire fire was put out after 34 days, the communities near the fire suffered horrifically from its toxic air, and many instances of asthma and other respiratory disease in the local towns have been directly attributed to it.

In the southern section of the valley, the small rural town of Alpaugh demonstrates how the inequity of water distribution due to agriculture is causing environmental injustice. Alpaugh's poorly built, shallow wells exposed its ground water arsenic contamination, at levels far above the US Environmental Protection Agency's safety standards. Alpaugh's water is at a level of 74 parts per million, but regulations set arsenic limits at no more than 10 parts per *trillion*. As a result, the town's three wells were poisoned to toxic levels, leaving the citizens of Alpaugh unable to drink water from their own facets. Instead of receiving the proper means and resources to properly repair the wells, the community received a quick-fix: a 5,000 gallon water tank, which was filled periodically. When the tank runs out, residents (at least those with cars) must drive 30 to neighboring towns to buy bottled water. The underlying

problem in Alpaugh is the unequal distribution of water resources; 80% of all the water used in California goes to agriculture, and the Central Valley has the largest and most advanced irrigation system in the world. But while the crops grown in the valley get irrigated with clean water from the snowmelts of the surrounding mountains, poor immigrants in towns like Alpaugh do not have access to potable water, nor given the means to repair their poisoned wells. Can anyone imagine a wealthy White community suffering from these problems? As one citizen of Alpaugh states, "It goes beyond discrimination, when cotton and alfalfa get better quality water than people."¹¹

The valley's agricultural industry has its effects on the environment and people of the valley as well, especially in regards to pesticide use and its effects on air quality. Pesticides present various health risks to people they come into contact, including cancer, damages to the reproductive system, and neurological disorders. Pesticide drift is a serious problem for those living in agricultural communities, as the airborne pesticides can move away from their fields and come into contact with people. Individual cases of acute pesticide drift have occurred in the valley, one of the worst known in the town of Earlimart in 1999, where toxic vapors from a potato field sent at least twenty-four people to hospitals, as well causing a steady increase of asthma and other respiratory ailments since the incident.¹²

Some marginalized communities have been intentionally targeted by pollution intensive industries, for belief that they will receive no resistance from them. While the trend of targeting poor communities for environmental exploitation has been going on for years, evidence of racial intent can be found in a report written for the California Waste Management Board, the Cerrell Report. When planning to locate toxic waste incinerators, the report suggested "that companies target small, rural communities, whose residents are low income, older people or people with a high school education or less; communities with a high proportion of Catholic residents; and communities whose residents are engaged in resource extractive industries such as agriculture, mining and forestry." This report perfectly describes the poor, rural towns of the Central Valley, and waste management companies have followed its recommendations. They placed an incinerator in the town of Grayson without the community's knowledge, as well as number of illegal actions in an ultimately failed attempt to build a toxic waste incinerator in the small, poor, and 95% Hispanic town of Kettleman City. The race, poverty and health conditions of the people of the valley linked with the environmental conditions they must live in create a social injustice caused through environmental damages, and issues of environmental justice.¹³

But these grievous incidents and the short term acute problems they cause overshadow the larger and growing problems that the people of the valley deal with on a daily basis. The valley's air quality is annually among the worst in the United States (rivaled only by Los Angeles and Houston), and surpassed in the world only by more industrialized areas such as Beijing, Mexico City or São Paulo. The valley has dangerously high levels of criteria pollutants, attributable to an array of sources, including farming, power plants, vehicle traffic and waste disposal. These factors are magnified by climatic conditions such as thermal inversions, trapping pollution in the winter, and high

pressure systems in the summer with little wind or rain, leaving pollution suspended in the air for long periods of time. Furthermore, the mountain ranges that bound the valley trap polluted air, preventing it from dissipating. Air pollution in this kind of geographic setting predictably results in continuous exposure to hazards, exposing the poor and vulnerable to greater health problems.

The health effects of this deplorable air quality are dramatic. Cases of asthma among young children as well as adults continues to remain higher than the national rates, as well as other respiratory ailments caused by high ozone levels (smog), particulate matter and pesticide exposure. In 1995, 20% of children in the valley had asthma, over twice the amount of the national average child asthma rate at 7.49%. Some schools have even begun to post red and green flags to warn parents to keep their children indoors on bad air days.

We argue these chronic air quality conditions are socially unjust because the poor and marginalized communities of the valley have limited ways to cope with the effects of this air pollution. Racially, the counties of the Central Valley (excluding the regions to the far north and foothills to the east) are 32% Hispanic or Latino. Out of all the counties of the valley, an average of 18.7% of the people live below the poverty line, with the highest percentage being Tulare County, at 24%.¹⁴ Correlating with these facts on race and poverty are the poor health conditions and lack of access to health care the valley's citizens live with. Racial minorities are at greater risk, because they commonly lack access to health care which can respond to them culturally or speak their language; this leaves many cases of respiratory ailments, especially asthma, undiagnosed and untreated. Over 29% of Latino children have no health insurance, preventing them from accessing treatments or preventative care.¹⁵

Everyone breathes the same air in the valley, but the poor and economically marginalized suffer the most. Without medications to treat asthma, children and seniors are unable to adequately cope with air pollution. Working age adults without health insurance become sick to the point of being unable to work, accelerating a downward cycle of poverty. Yet everyone in the valley breathes the same air, and this shared resource can become the basis for redressing pollution.

When Bishop Stephen Blaire arrived in Stockton, he was surprised to discover the degree to which environmental problems affected his diocese. In 2003, the Diocese of Stockton received a grant from the US Catholic Conference to assess the feasibility of an environmental justice initiative. During 2004-5, the diocese held 3 large, town hall meetings to discern a possible course of action. The diocese received input from Franciscan Fr. Ken Himes OFM, from local environmental leaders, and from the bishop himself. Out of these meetings emerged the theme of "Creating A Safe Environment for Our Children and Future Generations," as well as plans for an EJ Sunday during the Diocese's Respect Life Month in October, in which all priests would address EJ in their homilies. The diocese now educates and motivates Catholics to a deeper reverence and respect for God's creation, and to engage local parishes in activities aimed at dealing with environmental problems. They give a preferential focus to issues that affect the

poor, as well as those that enhance the capacity of local parishes to shape civic decisions.

Most of the diocese's work is conducted by an EJ committee. Comprised of church leaders, parish members and environmental activists, the committee works to inform their fellow parish members about the issues going on in their valley. The diocese is prioritizing air quality as an EJ issue for strategic reasons. It is an issue that touches everyone, is incontrovertible, and therefore less controversial than site-specific, acute problems. At the same time, the committee can point to the disproportionate burden of suffering borne by poor and marginalized communities.

One of us (Warner) has served as informal advisor to the diocesan initiative since its inception. He has attended numerous committee meetings, annually taught an EJ class at Santa Clara University, and taken students on field trips to the valley. For the past two years, a total of 6 students have served as EJ interns, assisting the diocesan initiative by designing educational tools and leading religious education events. Interns Luke Clause and Stephen Maurano are working directly with the EJ Committee to educate youth about air quality issues in the valley. Clause and Maurano provide their own environmental, scientific, social and religious knowledge about the EJ issues in the valley, and how to advocate for justice in the Catholic tradition. By drafting presentations and giving talks on air quality from a Catholic Social Teaching Perspective, Clause and Maurano provide the EJ Committee with resources for further advancing their goal of promoting knowledge of EJ issues in the Central Valley. The 6 interns have spoken to over 600 members of the diocese, linking Catholic social teaching with environmental stewardship. Our contribution has made a substantive educational contribution to the initiative, and we believe St. Francis would be proud of it.

Conclusion and implications for addressing poverty

A Biblical vision of justice is much more comprehensive than civil equity; it encompasses right relationships between all members of God's creation. Likewise, St. Francis is patron saint of the poor and of ecology. There is no essential contradiction between care for the poor and care for the Earth in the Franciscan worldview; they are both expressions of God and God's love.

Environmental degradation is not distributed randomly or equitably across the planet. The poor suffer from barriers to economic justice, and the lack of resources and superabundance of pollution frequently contribute to their suffering. Environmental justice places the poor and vulnerable at the center of environmental protection initiatives, and thus is fully consistent with a Franciscan worldview. It assumes a systematic framework, but once one learns to look for patterns, they become readily apparent at the local, national, and international scale.

Many of the poorest rural communities in California have been explicitly targeted for disposing of hazardous waste. The Central Valley suffers from some of the worst air quality in the US, and the poor, migrants, and communities of color suffer disproportionately. Those without health care, especially children, suffer unjustly. The Diocese of Stockton is now educating its members about a Catholic vision of

stewardship and environmental justice. They are framing the chronic problems of air pollution as a justice issue, and advocating for more responsive civic leadership by public officials. The Franciscan-inspired contribution of Santa Clara University faculty and interns, although small, demonstrates the possibility and importance of integrating education with advocacy, and care for the poor with care for the earth, in the Franciscan tradition.

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¹ Pope John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," in *"and God Saw That It Was Good": Catholic Theology and the Environment*, ed. Drew Christiansen, SJ and Walter Grazer (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference [originally published in 1990], 1996). The term "ecology" is actually a scientific discipline, despite the popular use of this to mean "environment."

² See Keith Douglass Warner, OFM, "Get Him out of the Birdbath!" in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Dawn M. Nothwehr OSF (Quincy, Illinois: Franciscan Press [republished from *The Cord* 48:2, 75-83], 2003), Keith Douglass Warner, OFM, "Taking Nature Seriously: Nature Mysticism, Franciscan Spirituality, and Environmental Advocacy," in *Franciscans and Creation: What Is Our Responsibility?* ed. Ilia Delio, OSF (St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2004). The Franciscan intellectual tradition does hold creation and creatures to be intrinsically morally significant, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

³ Luke W Cole and Sheila R Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

⁴ Robert D. Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement," in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston: South End Press, 1993).

⁵ Vernice Miller-Travis, "Social Transformation through Environmental Justice," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁶ United States Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1991).

⁷ Drew Christiansen, SJ, and Walter Grazer, eds. *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*. Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996, 18 n. 4. A collection and comparison of all Episcopal statements on the environment is much needed.

⁸ This program is described in William Somplatsky-Jarman, Walter Grazer, and Stan L. LeQuire, "Partnership for the Environment among Us Christians: Reports from the National Religious Partnership for the Environment," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁹ Columbia River Pastoral Letter Project, *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* (Seattle: Washington Catholic Conference, 2001). For an analysis, see Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Spirit of Place: The Columbia River Watershed Letter and the Meaning of Community," *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 30, no. 1 (2003).

¹⁰ Stephen Johnson, Gerald Haslam, and Robert Dawson, *The Great Central Valley: California's Heartland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

¹¹ John Gibbler, "Not a Drop to Drink," *Terrain* Winter (2005).

¹² Jill Harrison, "Invisible People, Invisible Places: Connecting Air Pollution and Pesticide Drift in California," in *Smoke and Mirrors: The Politics and Culture of Air Pollution*, ed. E. Melanie Dupuis (New York: NYU Press, 2004).

¹³ For a description of the Cerrell Report and the incinerators, see Cole and Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*.

¹⁴ J. Edward Taylor and Philip L. Martin, "Central Valley Evolving into Patchwork of Poverty and Prosperity," *California Agriculture* 54, no. 1 (2000). These statistics on race and poverty may not include non-citizens or undocumented immigrants working as farm laborers not taking part in censuses, so the rates of poverty and population of racial minorities are potentially even higher than officially reported.

¹⁵ Central Valley Air Quality Coalition, *Who Suffers from the Impacts of Air Pollution?* (2006).