Why Catholicism and the Environment?

Care for the earth is deeply Catholic. The growing concern for the health of our planet and its ability to provide even our basic requirements in the future is becoming more urgent. Through human activities the earth has lost half of all wetlands, half of all grassland, half of all forests and biodiversity is declining at an alarming rate. This severely restricts the natural and healthy functioning of ecosystems that we and other life depend upon. Combined with climate change these environmental crises provide the potential for a global catastrophe which will harm all people on earth.

Why Catholic schools?

Catholic schools are ideally placed to tackle these issues at many levels, and to do so in a way that is distinct and Catholic. The Catholic school system is not just another agency telling people how to behave: the schools provide theological and spiritual frameworks within which young people can think about environmental issues and deal with them through the wisdom of faith. A world-view that has God at its centre will have a holistic and mature attitude to our relationship with the natural world and can underpin and encourage lifestyles that enhance, not destroy, God’s creation.

What can schools do?

Catholic schools are invited to make a plan that will create positive generational changes towards the environment. There are many things schools can do to encourage a spiritual approach to sustainable living, and it is important to remember that this can be done over a number of years, taking time to consider what is best for your particular school and your pupils. If this process results in real changes being implemented then the next generation of decision-makers and citizens will have an invaluable treasure to help them cope in a world that is likely to face severe challenges over the next 50 years and beyond.

The earth, and all that lives on it, is held in the love of God: it reflects God’s presence into our lives everyday. Cherishing and caring for this most wondrous of planets, and celebrating this great gift is at the heart of Catholic Christianity. And never has the time been more right to bring that belief once more into the centre of our lives. Now is the time to act for our future, the future of all our children and the future of creation itself.
1. THE CURRICULUM:
Have you embedded the Catholic perspective on the natural world in the curriculum. Is there a spiritual aspect to nature activities? Do you promote engagement with the natural world through painting, drawing, photography, nature walks, gardening, cooking classes, technology lessons, clean-ups? Is Care for Nature just a science or is it incorporated in Religious Studies too? St Francis encouraged his monks to really observe nature: are your pupils encouraged to do the same?

2. ENERGY-EFFICIENCY:
Is your lighting low energy? Is your heating efficient? Is your school well insulated? Do you recycle rubbish - and engage the children in recycling? Are new buildings built with the lowest carbon footprint possible? Do you have recycled furniture? Solar panels? Can the students learn about appropriate technologies? Have you done an environmental audit to track the changes you make?

3. TRANSPORT:
Are you doing what you can to make sure that transport to and from school is as energy-efficient as possible? Are school buses low carbon? Do you encourage walking and cycling? Is there a secure bike rack at the school?

4. SCHOOL GROUNDS:
Are they wildlife friendly? Do they promote organic gardening? Are there bird tables, bat boxes, wild flower areas where the children can learn about nature?

5. FOOD SOURCING:
Do school meals follow the Soil Association’s suggested guidelines of 70% unprocessed/fresh, 30% organic? Do the pupils understand why these things are important? Are they aware of where their daily food comes from? Can they grow any food that you eat? Do you promote simple lifestyles and encourage children to think about how they live and the implications on others and wildlife?

6. NETWORKS AND ECO-TWINNING:
Has your school joined the Catholic Eco-Schools network? Can you contribute and help encourage others to good practice? Would you consider being part of an eco-twinning network whereby schools engage with each other across the world to learn about climate change and sustainable living. This could involve following a migratory bird like a swallow from your school down to Africa. Through learning about its journey, children can engage with environmental issues that affect our planet. Would your school engage with local wildlife and eco-organisations? Why not invite them to your Catholic celebrations so they can learn about your spiritual perspective while you learn from them?

7. CELEBRATION AND STORIES:
Do you celebrate Creationtide? This runs from September 1 through the harvest festivals to St Francis Day on October 4. What about a new celebration for nature at a time suitable to your area? Can the children write prayers and songs thanking God for nature? Can assemblies have an environmental theme? Is the joy and beauty of the world celebrated enough? Can Advent be a time of restraint and thoughtfulness rather than hedonising for a consumerist Christmas? Have you thought of creating a Lent calendar, with daily activities to help the environment? (see ARC’s website, in the downloads section)

8. ADVOCACY:
Encourage pupils to write to their MPs about environmental issues that concern them. Invite a local councillor or MP for an environmental Q & A session and tell them why you are making changes based on faith. Promoting active citizenship is vital for our future.

9. TIMETABLE CRASH:
Once a year could you consider doing a timetable crash? This is where for one whole day – St Francis’ Day, or Earth Day, or your school's Saint's Day - the whole curriculum is dedicated to nature? When one Catholic primary school in Somerset decided to do this, one class cleaned up a stream and learned about the insects; another built dens while learning about sustainable materials; another explored a wood while learning to identify trees. Others made prayer-flags with natural dyes, and then wrote prayers on them about the environment. And when the children came to say their prayers, many prayed it would be Earth Day every day.

10. SHOUT ABOUT YOUR SUCCESS!
Let the local newspapers, radio and TV know when you have implemented changes. Don’t be discouraged if they don’t respond straight away: one day they will be curious enough to find out what you are doing. Encourage children and teachers to be proud of sustainable living and show the world this is an exciting way to live, not gloomy and guilt ridden!

“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.”

Pope Benedict XVI at his Mass of Inauguration in 2005.

TOP: ST BRENDAN’S CATHOLIC COLLEGE STUDENTS EXPLORE THE WONDER OF NATURE WHILE BELOW: STUDENTS CONGRATULATE THEIR FELLOW’S FOR WALKING, CYCLING OR TAKING BUSES