BECOMING A CREATION STEWARD: STEWARDSHIP OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE BODY

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The Church’s concern over environmental issues has been discussed and addressed at many levels over the last couple of decades. Both John Paul II and Benedict the XVI elaborated that the underlying priority of all efforts must be to recognize that both natural ecology and human ecology are at stake and that stewardship is the needed Christian response. This session will provide an overview and guidelines for developing a faith based stewardship ethic and lifestyle.

Creation stewardship is a concept that emphasizes practicing a personal lifestyle that facilitates a caring for God’s creation as a process for reconciliation. The reconciliation theology of the Christian Life Movement emphasizes the reality that the world is broken through the ruptures of sin. As a result we suffer “disconnections” at four levels from: 1) God, 2) our true selves, 3) others and 4) creation (nature). Two consequences of those ruptures are that we can develop two functional disorders which can inhibit our ability to be creation stewards.

- **Nature deficit disorder** - Impacts our relationships with nature
- **Exercise deficit disorder** – Impacts our energy to be stewards

“Deficit” disorders

Many youth and adults suffer from **nature deficit disorder**. This term refers to the fact that many of us (but especially youth) are disconnected and alienated from nature. As a consequence many do not know, understand or appreciate God’s creation with the resultant effect of not caring about the environment, being afraid of nature, and, as a “disorder”; it keeps us from being creation stewards. Statistics indicate a 50% drop in time spent outdoors by youth and adults in America in the last 25 years.

Youth and adults also suffer from **exercise deficit disorder**. It refers to the fact that there is a corresponding disconnection and alienation from physical activity. The result is a lack of energy and the development of many health related problems such as obesity. Statistics indicate that 50% of American youth are obese and get little or no daily exercise. As a disorder it keeps us from having the energy, the will, and the discipline to be a creation steward.

John Paul II stated “Society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at lifestyle.” Consequently, overcoming those disorders can provide the process to developing a stewardship lifestyle.

A faith based stewardship ethic

There is a long Catholic tradition of an environmental stewardship ethic based on Holy Tradition and Sacred Scripture about what our role in the environment is and how we should respond to God’s creation. Humanity has a special role in God’s divine plan for creation with service to creation though human stewardship. Environmental concerns are linked to the Catholic social teaching and the Culture of Life. In recent years that ethic has received a renewal under the leadership of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI. A quote from John Paul II illustrates this.

“It is the duty of Christians and all who look to God the Creator to protect the environment by restoring a sense of reverence for the whole of God’s creation. It is the Creator's will that man should treat nature not as ruthless exploiter but as an intelligent and responsible administrator.

What many are not aware of is a parallel Catholic ethic on stewardship of the body. Sacred Scripture, the early Church fathers, and recent Popes have all provided insights into our responsibility to care for our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit with corresponding theological, philosophical, psychological and physiological rationales for the importance of being stewards for our bodies. Another quote from John Paul II illustrates this.

“For the Church cannot but encourage everything that serves the harmonious development of the human body. There is a need to find free time to exercise to guarantee that physical efficiency necessary to man's overall equilibrium. For this reason, the Church does not cease to recommend the best use of this marvelous instrument by a suitable physical education which…trains both body and spirit.”
Overcoming nature and exercise deficit disorders as a means to develop a stewardship ethic

The experience of working with stewardship initiatives through CREATIO, an apostolate of the Christian Life Movement (CLM), as well as with state and federal park nature interpretation programs has provided a perspective for developing a stewardship ethic and lifestyle. As a consequence, a five phase model can be defined to overcome nature deficit disorder.

- **Familiarity** with nature and the body leads to
- **Appreciation** and respect for nature and the body leading to
- **An Awareness** of nature and physical fitness issues that leads to
- **A Concern for nature and the body** leading to
- **Stewardship** – initiating lifestyle change

Developing a stewardship ethic for the environment

Those five phases can be viewed as objectives for developing a stewardship lifestyle. In turn, there are three steps to meeting those objectives which provide the framework for leading one through those five phases: Encountering, Exploring and Engaging.

- **ENCOUNTERING** God’s creation and nature. The process of encountering is to awaken enthusiasm for nature to have a familiarity and appreciation with creation.
- **EXPLORING** environmental issues and ethics. This involves becoming aware of the major environmental issues (atmosphere, water, soil, deforestation, species loss and waste), the human role in them, and a Catholic based ethic for addressing them. In addition, it can involve a process for examining personal lifestyle and community needs
- **ENGAGING** creation. This is the action element where concern motivates stewardship actions individually and collectively. Example Individual lifestyle changes to address are: What can we reduce? What we can reuse? What we can eliminate or substitute? What can we create or initiate?

Developing a stewardship ethic of the body

The experience of providing outdoor education and exercise programs has led to the conclusion that stewardship of the environment can be favorably affected by individuals becoming more active and physically fit. The human body is a self-regulating energy producer and user. Physical activity can be a powerful vehicle for developing a stewardship ethic through activities that connect with nature. There is commonality between the needs of the environment and the needs of our body. For example, there are the same habitat needs of water, food, shelter, space and air.

While the focus here is on exercise and fitness within the context of stewardship, facilitating a fit and active lifestyle is also, by itself, a positive force for one’s physical and mental health. In summary, by caring for your body, you care for creation. A parallel 3 step process can be applied:

- **ENCOUNTERING** the body by experiencing and observing its reactions to physical activity.
- **EXPLORING** health and fitness issues and ethics. This involves becoming aware of one’s level of physical activity and fitness and a Catholic based ethic for being fit.
- **ENGAGING** your body. This is the action element where concern motivates practicing an exercise and nutritional lifestyle to develop energy and dynamic health. Incorporating activity into daily life, focused fitness training activities and nature connection physical activities are examples.

Stewardship as reconciliation

The Christian Life Movement (CLM) provides a focus for living the Christian life by highlighting reconciliation as an approach to one’s spirituality with many implications for practicing stewardship. Within the CLM our faith journey can be viewed as an ongoing reconciliation process to overcome the four ruptures of sin (with God, with oneself, with others and with creation (nature) that we experience in the world. CREATIO as an apostolate of the CLM attempts to address these ruptures through focused efforts on developing a stewardship ethic with nature and with ourselves (through physical fitness) in that our bodies are also part of God’s creation.
That reconciliation theme can provide a basis for actions in the world to get back to the original plan of God as an ordered, good, and harmonious creation. While the focus is on environmental actions for reconciliation with the forth rupture (creation), such endeavors are ultimately aimed to renew and restore the many broken relationships in the world within all four ruptures.

One way of viewing our actions to be reconciled is by moving from being spectators in our faith to participants. That participation can take several forms. To participate requires having physical, mental and spiritual energy. That energy is developed through exercise and physical activity to develop physical fitness. We develop ourselves as participants and we help others to be participants by making the effort to live fully within our body. The action aspect of stewardship can be initiated by practicing the most basic form of stewardship – stewardship of the body. Each of the four reconciliation domains can be explored for the physical fitness and exercise implications:

**Reconciliation with God**
- Jesus was our model of a healthy fitness lifestyle. If we truly want to be like him we need to follow his physical role model. Maintaining a fitness lifestyle can provide the self-discipline to focus and reflect more on our relationship with God, teaches humility to “give up” the illusion of control and trust God more, and activities such as walking can facilitate an active prayer life.

**Reconciliation with Self**
- The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit so practicing a healthy fitness lifestyle supports that “temple”. Practicing a fitness lifestyle can be a transferable self-discipline that can be applied to serving God, can serve as a healthy outlet for dealing with anger, stress and depression, can aid in developing a needed balance in our lives, and is an honest process that allows us to know more about ourselves - who am I at the deepest level (what am I lacking?, what do I need to change?).

**Reconciliation with Others**
- At any point in time we are a role model for practicing the Christian life – for better or for worse. How well we serve as role models influences our impact on others. Practicing a fitness lifestyle helps to maintain the energy to be able to help meet the needs of others and encourage others to practice a healthy fitness lifestyle so they have the energy to help themselves.

**Reconciliation with Creation**
- Participate with creation by trying to be a “good animal” through eating and exercise habits that support and help sustain natural habitats. Practicing a fitness lifestyle is necessary to maintain the energy to provide stewardship actions for the environment.

**Conclusion**

The development of a stewardship of creation and stewardship of the body lifestyle can provide a means to confront nature deficit and exercise deficit disorders and provides a process to develop a stewardship ethic that translates to a concern and commitment to care for God’s creation.