



Joint Statement from the Catholic Bishop of Townsville and Anglican Bishop of North Queensland



In the Care of Our Common Home: “Sister Earth”

This time of the year is regularly celebrated by many Christian Churches, including Anglican and Catholic, as a Season of Creation – a time when, in the footsteps of Francis of Assisi, we recall the nobility of our human vocation as co-creators in God’s creative action throughout the world. 1.

Firstly, we recall the thousands of years of our scriptural tradition where creation is seen as an ongoing action of the Creator, an expression of God’s artistry and nature as a place where we can know our God intimately because Nature is our “first Bible”. Further, within that tradition we recognise that every creature, every person, every element in creation is made in the love of God.

As Christians and people of the world, every one of us has been called to care for the gift of creation both today and for future generations. Each of us is important in this care as we have each been especially chosen: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5).

Benedict XVI reminds us that “Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each is necessary.”²

St Paul and many of our Christian heroines and heroes, countless theologians and spiritual leaders have stressed our inter-connectedness with all of creation. So much so that we can see ourselves as one family – a family who share a common home. Similarly, modern scientists confirm an amazing evolutionary process which connects all of creation across our cosmos.

For Christians, this care for our common home, is not an optional or secondary aspect of our daily living, rather it is “an essential part of our faith”. 3

Over the past thirty years, Christian leaders around the world have been issuing statements and passing motions that encourage us to make the connection between caring for the planet, its people and every element within it as being “essential” to our response for the gifts of creation.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, of the Eastern Orthodox Church, is a well-published leading ecological advocate.^{4/} In 2009 Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hosted a meeting of faith leaders and community organisations at Lambeth Palace to discuss the response of faith communities to the environmental crisis. In the first statement of its kind, signed by leaders of faith community (including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Bahai, Jain and Zoroastrians) the signatories recognise “unequivocally that there is a moral imperative to tackle the causes of global warming. Further, that “Faith communities have a crucial role to play for pressing for changes in behaviour at every level of society and in every economic sector. We all have a responsibility to learn how to live and develop sustainably in a world of finite resources.”^{5/}

A significant document from Pope Francis entitled *Laudato Si –On Care for Our Common Home* was published in June 2015. It is not written to Catholics or Christians alone but to every person in the world. He addresses every person because of his concern for a planet where we no longer respect Nature as a shared gift. Instead, we regard it as a private possession to do with what we like. Pope Francis is so concerned with the deterioration of the planet that he describes it thus: “The Earth, our home, is beginning to look like an immense pile of filth.”⁶

Two themes run through the letter, which for Catholics, contains official social teaching. Firstly, there is a theme of hope and affirmation of those who, for so long, have regarded the earth as a sublime gift and legacy and undertake their eco-responsibility day by day. Secondly, he raises all the major environmental issues of the planet and calls for greater dialogue in developing an “Integral Ecology –one that incorporates environmental, economic and social ecologies. He calls us to a new way of viewing creation as well as a new, simpler life-style.”⁷

We, too, as Bishops in North Queensland, have concerns about many global and local issues that are impacting negatively on our environment and which require greater dialogue, examination, prayer and action.

These would be as follows:

- Modern society has compromised the intrinsic dignity of the world. “Nature is seen as an insensate order, a cold body of facts, an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape.”⁸ It seems that the protection of Nature is something “secondary” to “progress” and only for the “greenies” or “leftists”.
- Society has also developed a vision of “Dominating Nature”, a mastery over the world, and, given the chance, a mastery over the universe.⁹ Our “dominion” over the planet should be understood more properly in the sense of “responsible stewardship,” especially to future generations.¹⁰

There are several local issues which need to be addressed in terms of “Responsible Stewardship.”

- “The Elephant in the Room” is obviously the the Great Barrier Reef with back-to-back yearly coral bleaching across two thirds of its length. impending loss of Continuing toxic run-off from land holdings, increasing ocean temperatures, regular monsoonal failures, a prospective wholesale increase of freighter traffic, the loss of marine diversity and extensive marine pollution are accelerating reef deterioration.^{11/} Inadequate and limited government rectification spending is not matching needs.¹² World Heritage listed, the Great Barrier Reef is being watched by the world as it is the largest and most famous of all coral ecosystems.
- Another “Pearl of Great Price” that is in danger is our incredible Artesian Basin and its age-old water resources. The projected mega- mining developments across Queensland, especially the Galilee Basin, look to usurp this “coal resource for all ages.”¹³
- Other issues of concern are the significant increase in lung disease with local coal mine employees and the one-third increase in land-clearing across the state.
- Overall there has been a lack of “Big-business” governance and transparency as we’ve experienced with Storm Financial, Yabulu collapse and the several large-scale development collapses which left sub-contractors unpaid. There is a need to restore a moral compass in financial services and economic management. There is a solitary focus with financial growth, C.E.O. salaries, shareholder dividends in contrast to employees who are offered no permanency with preference given to contract and casual labour.¹⁴
- The “White Australia “Policy is alive and well in North Queensland with Indigenous Land Right claims and cultural development often viewed disparagingly by many. Our First Australians are still seeking recognition.¹⁵
- There is an obvious power-imbalance between Mega-business interests, some Government Departments and individual and small family business - as we experienced with the Department of Defence “land-grab” on Hervey range and now the PFAS pollution of areas surrounding Lavarack Barracks and the Garbutt Airforce Base.¹⁶
- We are concerned with the escalating gap between the “Haves” and the “Have-nots” across North Queensland which we believe leads to extreme political stances in our communities and result in less community harmony, justice and peace.
- Politics and Business have been slow to provide strong leadership or urgency for the common good: a leadership that incorporates environmental issues as much as the financial, social or political issues. We know from experience that the maximisation of

profit, frequently isolated from other considerations, reflects a misunderstanding of economy. In fact, “a technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress.” 17

- There is a need for urgent dialogue in the critique of the “modern myths” of “individualism, self-centredness, self-absorption, progress that is unlimited, the unregulated market, competition and consumerism as a remedy for all ills.” 18

We applaud those in our communities who have responded already to the many serious issues that our *Common Home* faces; those who undertake their stewardship seriously day by day. You are making a difference!

We see families and individuals living more sustainably, businesses with “common good” ethical practices, fishermen, farmers and pastoralists who have changed old practices and really care for their, and our, land and seascapes.

We give thanks for those scientists, N.G.O’s, Climate Councils, research bodies and professional institutions who provide accurate and relevant data to assist our decision-making.

There are many Indigenous Organisations and groups who, against overwhelming odds, are restoring culture with its inherent care for creation.

Although there are a limited number of politicians who are active on behalf of the environment, they are to be commended!

Remarkably, there are so many individuals who now see that caring for their environment is an important “first-step” in the development of their spirituality. People are taking practical steps to live more sustainably with increasing numbers of individuals and institutions divesting from fossil fuels. 19

Our schools and educational establishments are pleasingly active in building our traditional “See/Judge/Act” principles into their students. Many have taken giant strides in sustainable practice with their buildings grounds, curriculum integration, outreach to others and daily internal operations. So too, many of our parishes have long served the poor and have more recently developed sustainable living practices.


One might rightfully ask “Are the Churches going green?” Quite simply, the answer is “Yes”, but not in a simplistic definition that much of the modern media would describe. Pope Francis, recognising the powerful forces of aggression, ignorance and antipathy against those who would stand up for the environment and the common good, stated, soon after his Papal appointment, that “In this day and age, unless Christians are revolutionaries, they

are not Christians.”²⁰ He believes Christians need to “turn around” the way we see nature, the ways we care for creation and its people and live more simply with less negative impact on the environment.

We are people of hope. We are people of prayer. We are people of action.

With a deep sense of communion with all that makes up our common home we can bring a compassion, a tenderness to all of creation that will make a difference for this and future generations. In confidence we can accept the courageous challenge of the *Millennial Earth Charter*: “As never before in history, common destiny beckons us to seek a new beginning ... Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace and the joyful celebration of life.”²¹

Or, in the spirit of Francis of Assisi, let ours be a time where we treat our common home like “... a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us.”²²



Most Rev. Timothy Harris
Catholic Bishop of Townsville



The Right Reverend William Ray
Anglican Bishop of North Queensland

References:

1. *Laudato Si-On care of Our Common Home*, #131, Pope Francis, Rome, June 2015
2. op.cit. # 65
3. op.cit. #217 & 64
4. “Joint Message on World day of Prayer for Creation”, Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis, Sept. 2017.
5. *Rowan Williams-Faith and Climate Change*, Lambeth Palace, Oct.29, 2009.
6. *Laudato Si*, # 21
7. *Laudato Si*, Chapter 4 “Integral Ecology”
8. *Laudato Si*, #115-6
9. ABC radio report of scientists and business personnel planning sites to mine Mars, Sept.2017.
10. “Everyone’s Business-Developing an Inclusive Economy”, Australian Catholic Bishops’ Council, Social Justice Statement for 2017-18. Also *Laudato Si* #159-60, “Justice between the Generations”.
11. ABC, Four Corners, 2/10/17; Paul Lucas, *The Great White Barrier Reef*, The Far East, Columban Fathers, Melbourne, June,2017.
12. Jon Brodie, ARC Centre for Marine Studies, James Cook University, 2017.

13. Four Corners, ABC T.V., 25/9/17 and *Laudato Si* #27-31, "The issue of water".
14. *Laudato Si* # 124, "The need to protect employment".
15. One only has to read regular comments in local newspapers or watch the rise of One Nation as a political party. Also *Laudato Si* # 143, "Cultural Ecology".
16. *Four Corners, ABC T.V., 4/10/17: media reports of land-holders' issues ; Laudato Si #165, "Slow response from Politics and Business's"*.
17. *Everyone's Business, op.cit.* and *Laudato Si* #94=95.
18. "Climate Council Report", David Twomey, Oct.5 , 2017; also *Laudato Si* # 106-114 – A Global Technocratic Paradigm ; and *Laudato Si* # 194-5 and # 210.
19. Christina Lean, "GCCM Report", 4/10/2017.
20. "Docat – The Social Teaching of the catholic Church", Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, April 2016, p.278. and *Laudato Si* # 194-5.
21. The Earth Charter, The Hague, June 29 , 2000.
22. *Laudato Si* # 1.