

EARTH CHARTER

Study Guide

SCHOOL SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME • SHALOM North America
JULY 2004

THE SCOPE OF THE EARTH CHARTER

The Earth Charter is comprised of a Preamble, 4 main sections which include the 16 principles, and a closing called "The Way Forward." The Preamble, the inspirational part of the document, gives us a rationale for what we are about. In this issue of the Earth Charter study guide, we reflect on the text of the Preamble and Section I to begin to understand the scope of the Earth Charter which is about so much more than "the Earth."

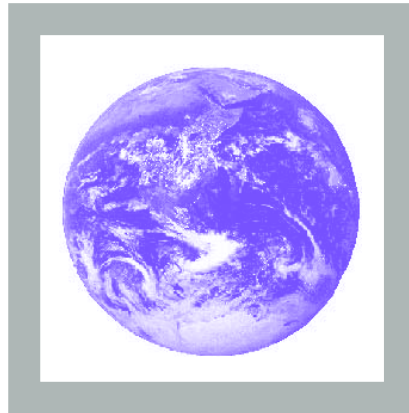
by Eileen Reilly, SSND (WI)

PREAMBLE TO THE EARTH CHARTER

"We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future." Beginning with these words, the Preamble to the Earth Charter challenges us to deal with a future of "great peril and great promise."

Our age gives us two icons with which to appreciate both the peril and the promise. One is the image of the living Earth, seen for the first time from space less than 50 years ago. This blue gem of a planet has become for us a symbol of awe, of wonder, and of peace and unity. The other icon, also embedded in our minds, is the image of two gigantic towers, consumed by fire and then collapsing into a pile of rubble. This nightmare image of the World Trade Towers has become a symbol of fear, hatred, violence and a deeply troubled and divided world.

The Preamble continues, "The spirit of human solidarity and



AP photo Chao Soi Cheong
<http://www.firehouse.com/terrorist/images/>

What is your first memory of seeing the image of the Earth from space? What thoughts or feelings came to mind?

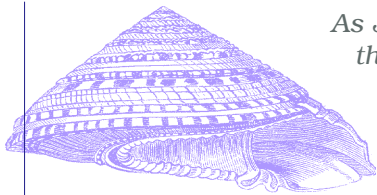
What thoughts or feelings came to mind as you viewed the images of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11/01?

How does each image speak of "great peril and great promise"?

kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature." Is this what the writer of Deuteronomy meant with the simple phrase, "Choose Life."?

What would it be like to have "humility regarding the human place in nature"? Can you think of an example of when this might be evident in your own life or experience?

The Preamble to the Earth Charter gives us the inspiration for all that follows. It is here that we find the call for humanity to "choose its future." That is what we are about. And the urgency we find in the Preamble is real.



As John Paul II said so well, “If we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God’s expectations. . . . We must therefore encourage and support the ecological conversion’ which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.”
 (John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, 1990)

In what ways have you become “more sensitive to the catastrophe” to which humanity is heading? What ecological conversions have you personally experienced?

SECTION I RESPECT AND CARE

Section I lists four broad commitments as components of respect and care for the community of life. Issues underlying these broad commitments and the details of how to address them are spelled out in detail in the next three sections and in the conclusion - The Way Forward.

FOR THE

Increasingly our Church is calling us to pay attention to these same issues. In their recent (October 4, 2003) pastoral letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative, which is titled, “You Love All That Exists,” the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops concludes by saying,

COMMUNITY OF

“All of creation is of God and is as yet unfinished. We are called as co-creators to join God’s work to repair some of creation’s wounds which have been inflicted due to our ecological sins. We are also called to creative actions of solidarity with those who have less access to the benefits of God’s bountiful creation. . . . How can we not take up the challenge?”

How might you “join God’s work to repair some of creation’s wounds”? What does the term “ecological sins” mean to you?



from “Beginners”
 by Denise Levertov,
Candles in Babylon,
 New York, New Dimensions
 Publishing, 1982.

HOW GREAT THOU ART!
 O Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder . . .
 HOW GREAT THOU ART!
 HOW GREAT THOU ART!

**But we have only begun
 To love the earth.**

**We have only begun
 To imagine the fullness of life.**

**How could we tire of hope?
 —so much is in bud.**

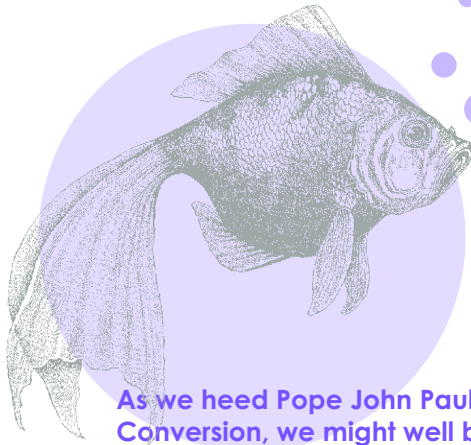
**How can desire fail?
 —we have only begun
 to imagine justice and mercy,**

**only begun to envision
 how it might be
 to live as siblings with beast and flower,
 not as oppressors.**

**How often or when have you
 felt “awesome wonder” when
 you thought of creation?
 Compare/contrast God’s
 power with human power.**

**With so much of the world in
 such chaos, have you ever
 found yourself tiring of hope?
 What does the Earth Charter say
 to you about hope?**

**“To live as siblings with beast
 and flower...” Francis of Assisi
 spoke of Brother Sun and Sister
 Water. How can/do we honor
 that relationship in real life?**



ANNIE DILLARD AND ELLERY

Annie Dillard
describes Ellery,
her pet goldfish.

As we heed Pope John Paul's call to Ecological Conversion, we might well begin by contemplating some simple gift of the earth, like Ellery. Choose the object of your contemplation, and jot down the kind of detailed description that Dillard did for Ellery.

"This Ellery cost me twenty-five cents. He is

deep red-orange, darker than most goldfish. He steers short distances mainly with his slender red lateral fins; they seem to provide impetus for going backward, up, or down. It took me a few days to discover his central fins, they are completely transparent and all but invisible—dream fins...This fish, two bits worth, has a coiled gut, a spine radiating fine bones, and a brain! Just before I sprinkle food flakes into his bowl, I rap three times on the bowl's edge: now he is conditioned, and swims to the surface when I rap." *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, New York, Harper Publications, 1974.

RESPECT EARTH AND LIFE IN ALL ITS DIVERSITY.

If creation in all its splendor really does reveal God to us, then each time a species becomes extinct, we know a little less of God. See Section II of the Earth Charter for details.

In 1992, there were only about 600,000 elephants in Africa, down from 2 million in the early 70s, mainly because of ivory poaching. In 2002 the number was less than 500,000, despite a worldwide ivory ban.

CARE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE WITH UNDERSTANDING, COMPASSION, AND LOVE.

"As the desire of Jesus that all be one becomes more fully our own, our striving for unity embraces all humanity and the whole of creation." YAS C9 See Section III for details.

In 1992, thirteen cities worldwide had populations of more than ten million people. By 2002, the number of cities had risen to sixteen and the projection for 2005 is nineteen. That will mean fully 49% of the population will be living in mega-cities.

BUILD DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES THAT ARE JUST, PARTICIPATORY, SUSTAINABLE AND PEACEFUL.

"Through our ministry . . . we are enabled to grow in communion with God and with one another and in acceptance of responsibility for the earth and its people. This mutual giving and receiving is itself a witness to our interdependent world." YAS C25 See Section IV for details.

In 1992, the number of refugees worldwide, totaled 17 million, many of these internally displaced due to civil wars. By 2002, the number had increased to at least 20 million. In 1992, world military spending was at \$992 billion. After the Cold War, it fell to \$811 billion, but it is now on its way back up, partly because of the huge rise in US military spending.

SECURE EARTH'S BOUNTY AND BEAUTY FOR PRESENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.

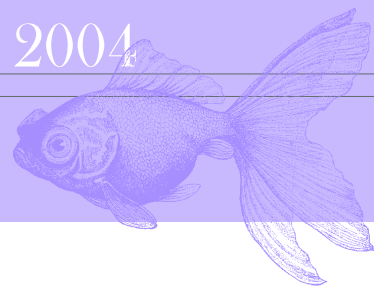
". . . there is an order in the universe which must be respected, . . . the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations." (John Paul II, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* 1990) See "The Way Forward," the Conclusion of the Earth Charter for details.

In 1992, the world population was 5.47 billion. In the year 2000, we passed the 6 billion mark, so that by 2002 it was 6.25 billion. Projections are that by 2050, the population will have grown by half as much again, for a total of 9 billion. Over 70% of the current population lives in developing countries, enjoying a much smaller share of the "Earth's bounty and beauty" than those of us in the industrialized countries.

Statistics reflect the state of the world in 1992, the time of the Summit in Rio. They were used for comparison with the world in 2002, the time of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Source: *The Independent*, a London newspaper, on August 26, 2002.

NEXT STUDY GUIDE October 2004

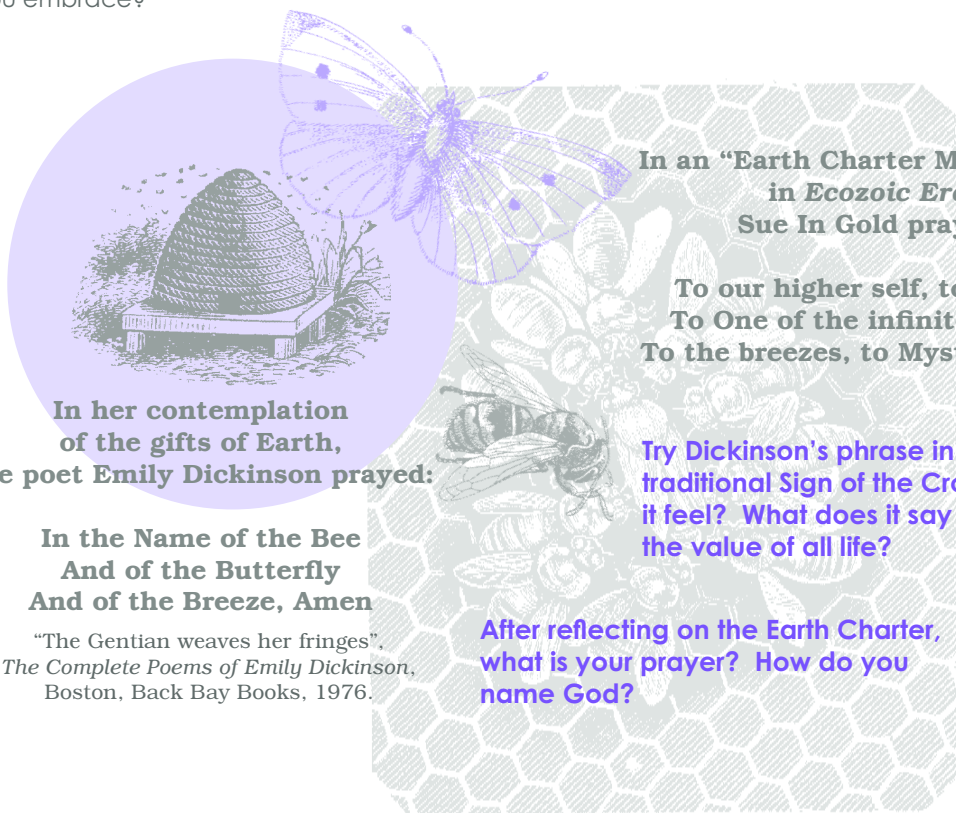
Ecological Integrity



FOR YOUR REFLECTION . . .

As you reflect on the Preamble to the Earth Charter, what resonates deeply within you? With what do you disagree? What section do you find most challenging?

What "creative actions of solidarity with those who have less access to the benefits of God's beautiful creation" can you embrace?



In her contemplation of the gifts of Earth, the poet Emily Dickinson prayed:

**In the Name of the Bee
And of the Butterfly
And of the Breeze, Amen**

"The Gentian weaves her fringes",
The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,
Boston, Back Bay Books, 1976.

**In an "Earth Charter Meditation,"
in *Ecozoic Era*,
Sue In Gold prayed:**

**To our higher self, to others,
To One of the infinite names,
To the breezes, to Mystery, Amen**

**Try Dickinson's phrase in place of the
traditional Sign of the Cross. How did
it feel? What does it say to you about
the value of all life?**

**After reflecting on the Earth Charter,
what is your prayer? How do you
name God?**

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LEARN MORE

1. Calculate your "ecological footprint" by answering 12 questions about the resources of our Earth that you consume on a daily basis. Visit <http://www.lead.org/leadnet/footprint/intro.html>

2. Learn more about the Earth Charter, including educational resources, an art section, and youth initiatives. Visit <http://www.earthcharter.org>

3. Subscribe to a periodical that will give more insight than the mainstream media into these issues. A few suggestions: *The New Internationalist* (information at www.newint.org or 1 800 661 8700); *Yes! A Journal of Positive Futures* (Information at <http://www.yesmagazine.org> or 1 800 937 4451).