

Catholic Earthcare Australia

ASSISI

A Strategic Systems-based Integrated Sustainability Initiative

Context: Call for a radical conversion

Over his 28 year pontificate John Paul II made hundreds of appeals for better care of creation and more responsible stewardship of the Earth community in his encyclicals, homilies & speeches.

We must encourage and support the "ecological conversion" which... has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.

Man is no longer the Creator's "steward", but an autonomous despot, who is finally beginning to understand that he must stop at the edge of the abyss.¹

Human beings are appointed by God as stewards of the earth to cultivate and protect it.

From this fact there comes what we might call their "ecological vocation", which in our time has become ever more urgent.²

How are we to take on our ecological vocation, and experience ecological conversion? How can we shift from a quest for dominance in relation to others, and in relation to the universe, to a quest for communion? How can we move towards the spirituality of communion so compellingly articulated in Novo Millennio inuente?

Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the Eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit whom Jesus gives us, to make us all "one heart and one soul".³ This communion is the mystery of love given in participation and received in sharing. It is not the fruit of an institution, an organization. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.⁴

¹ Pope John Paul II, January 2001

² Pope John Paul II, August 2002

³ Novo Millennio ineunte n. 42

⁴ Novo Millennio inuente n. 43

A Catholic response to the call

We can only respond to this call in communion with others. *A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us...This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship.*⁵

It is this call to a spirituality of communion that brings us into genuine community that is beyond institutional forms, and that provides the vehicle for this radical conversion. Inward contemplation enables an engagement with God and all of Creation that makes way for radical conversation. Conversation is the means for bringing to life a spirituality of communion. Conversion is what happens whenever authentic conversation occurs. Community is the place where conversation continually provokes conversion. It is no etymological fluke that conversation and conversion have the same Latin roots from which we have pressed both words into English. The etymological connection tells us some important truth. It tells us a story about our humanness and our share in the Divine Life as a gift of Grace.

*Talking happens a lot. It is often monologue. Conversation is rarer by far. It is always dialogue. No one takes leave of a real conversation the same as when one entered into it. Our conversations create us. Conversation and risk and conversion belong together. Conversation is dangerous, therefore, to anyone unwilling to embrace or at least to accept transformation*⁶. This linking of conversation, risk and conversion reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit that is present “where two or three are gathered together in my name”. The ultimate vulnerability – the image of Jesus on the Cross – remains our inspiration.

True conversation always puts conversants at risk, because you cannot truly converse without risk of conversion. *No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us. Thus we can say that something was a good conversation or that it was ill-fated. All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own,...that it allows something to “emerge”.*⁷ It is thus in authentic community and in genuine conversation that we are able to experience the

⁵ Novo Millennio inuente n.43

⁶ Michael Cowan & Bernard Lee SM (1997) *Conversation, Risk and Conversion: the inner and public life of small Christian communities*

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975) *Truth and Method*. The origin of the term dialogue is dia (through) logos (meaning or relationship). It has to do with creating or constructing meaning

‘culture of communion’ referred to in Novo Millenio. The spirituality of communion, “by prompting a trust and openness...supplies institutional reality with a soul” that enables all members of the People of God to exercise their responsibility.⁸ In this emergence in authentic conversation in community we experience the ‘unfolding of the fruits of the spirit’ which are the catalyst for a radical conversion.

Join people in a genuine bond of connection where conversation allows them to participate in one another’s lives (*koinonia*). Church happens. The word *koinonia* also connects with meanings around the notion of participation. *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that redemption itself has a fundamentally participative character, based in relationships where mutuality thrives and where reconciliation is expected to occur.⁹ Whenever people are gathered in my name... there am I in their midst.

Those in the human and social sciences promoting forms of human inquiry that build community and respect different ways of coming to know, talk about ‘participative consciousness’ as part of a ‘resacralisation’ of the world. *Sacred experience is based in reverence, in awe and love of creation, valuing it for its own sake, in its own right as a living presence. To deny participation not only offends against human justice, not only leads to errors in epistemology, not only strains the limits of the natural world, but is also troublesome for human souls and for the anima mundi*¹⁰

Sustainable communities are learning communities in living relationship with others, with God, and with all creation. *One characteristic of a participative worldview is that the individual person is restored to the circle of community and the human community to the context of the wider natural world. To make whole also means to make holy: another characteristic of a participative worldview is that meaning and mystery are restored to human experience, so that the world is once again experienced as a sacred place.*¹¹ The call for a participative worldview is made by Thomas Berry, when he identifies the ‘great work’ of humanity in our time as being “to carry out the transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans would be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner”, and asks how are our individual human projects might

⁸ Novo Millenio inuente n.45

⁹ Cowan and Lee remind us of the significance of *Lumen Gentium*, and put these concepts in their context

¹⁰ Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury in the introduction to the book which they edited: [Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration](#) in *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2001). ‘Anima mundi is translated as "the soul of the world" from Latin

¹¹ Peter Reason (ed) (1994) *Participation in Human Inquiry*

align with it.¹² His goal is to restore the intimacy of humans with the natural world in a ‘single community of existence’.

ASSISI is just such a response to the ‘great work’ of humanity. It intentionally works with organisations to constitute a ‘learning community’, and engages with the broader community of which the organisation is a part, to build sustainable communities. ASSISI does not come with ‘solutions’ to ecological sustainability, but rather provides the learning infrastructure for schools, organisation, church agencies and congregations, and the broader community, to come to understand the critical issues facing them and how they might address them together. In this way, ASSISI seeks to integrate work and learning, and honour the two key principles of learning, namely that it is contextual and that it is social.

Building learning communities over time means that there is a forum for candid and generative conversations in a safe environment, thus allowing an evolving web of deepening personal relationships, which is the manifestation of genuine community. Ideas emerge and are refined through conversation – that dynamic, boundaryless human activity that has a unique role in creating the new.

This also means that while each learning community will be the embodiment of a common pattern, each will also be unique. This evolving structure takes a simple principle from nature: that an unending variety of form is possible from simple building blocks. Each learning community has to generate itself out of its interpretation of the purpose and principles of ASSISI, and its response to the relevant local and national frameworks and reporting systems. Variety comes from the environment in which each emerges. Commonality emerges from underlying theory and guiding ideas, not from an imposed common form¹³. The common purpose that evolves for each learning community is beyond self interest and shared responsibility, and is the foundation for true community, which provides the context for ecological conversion.

Collaboration is fundamental to the success of such a joint enterprise, and is always about relationships. Eagerness to work together, and to continue working together, arises as a by-product of perceived mutuality and trust. Ongoing reflection and learning is a critical aspect of ASSISI, and involves the whole community. At the same time, we appreciate that the capacity to sense emerging futures is equally critical, to avoid fixing on solutions and making an ‘ideology’ of ecological sustainability. Involvement of the broader

¹² Thomas Berry (1999) *The Great Work: our way into the future*

¹³ This thinking and practice has been applied elsewhere, and is fully documented in *Community Action Research: Learning as a community of practitioners, consultants and researchers* by Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer (Handbook of Action Research 2001)

community is critical to bringing together diverse perspectives and distinctive abilities to a single project. Thomas Berry talked about the need to bring together different forms of knowing, each with its own distinctive tradition, in carrying out the human project¹⁴. He ascribes to the wisdom of women the bringing together of the traditional binaries: body and mind; soul and spirit; intimacy and detachment; intuition and reasoning; feeling consciousness and intellectual analysis; subjective presence and objective distance. It is the bringing together of different wisdom traditions in the context of concrete, particular, local practices that constitutes what Denis Edwards calls ‘ecological praxis’¹⁵.

Thus the response of ASSISI recognises “*that the extraordinary inter-relatedness that ecologists find in the biosphere on earth, and the inter-connectedness that science discovers at all levels from quantum physics to cosmology, is all sustained at every moment by the Creator. We are intimately connected with the whole life-system of the planet and the complex interaction between other living creatures and the atmosphere, the land the water systems.*”¹⁶ This understanding of the cosmos as radically interconnected and evolutionary brings with it the participative worldview articulated above. It also brings with it a deep commitment to participatory processes as part of a ‘living process’. What this means for us is that we see the initiative as an ‘emergent, evolutionary and educational process of engaging with self, persons and communities’. This leads us to ask questions about emergence and enduring consequence. Our emphasis on practical outcomes draws us to pragmatic questions of practice and practising. The different ways of knowing brings us to questions about plural ways of knowing, while the relational dimension draws our attention to the quality of interaction in living relationship and questions of relational practice. Our questions about meaning and purpose encourage us to ask whether the inquiry process has addressed questions about significance. Have we created an inquiry process that is worthy of human aspiration?¹⁷

This mutual dependence of a diversity of components is what ASSISI seeks to exemplify, while recognising the enormity of the challenge:

¹⁴ In *The Great Work* Berry talks about the four wisdom traditions, each distinctive and with its own historical development, that provide common support to the Great Work: indigenous peoples, women, classical traditions and science

¹⁵ Denis Edwards (1995) *Jesus the Wisdom of God*. In *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (2007) he goes further to say that ecological praxis ‘is not only a radical reorientation of thought, and it is not only the discovery of a new capacity for feeling for nonhuman creation. It is both of these issuing forth in personal, political and ecclesial action’ (p 112)

¹⁶ Catholic Earthcare Australia (2005) *Climate Change: our Responsibility to Sustain God’s Earth*.

¹⁷ Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury in the introduction to the book which they edited: *Inquiry and Participation in Search of a World Worthy of Human Aspiration* in *Handbook of Action Research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2001)

To engage our intellectual powers and our ability to discover the meaning of what God has created will require a change of heart and mind. It will require an ecological conversion. (Bishop Chris Toohey)

Catholic Earthcare Australia: Responding to the call for radical conversion

A Catholic response to John Paul II's call to ecological conversion and ecological vocation embraces ethical and spiritual arguments drawn from its faith tradition. Particularly in the last century, a body of Catholic Social Teaching has been developed that provides principles to guide human behavior towards the common good.¹⁸ It now includes teaching on the natural world and environmental issues. The recently published Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church contributes further to the church's teaching on ecological matters and humanity's right relationship with the rest of creation:

...The common good of society is not an end in itself; it has value only in reference to attaining the ultimate ends of the person and the universal common good of the whole of creation (No 170)

At the launch of Catholic Earthcare Australia, Archbishop John Bathersby said:

The entire life of Christians is an exploration into Christ. Each generation pushes back ever so slightly this envelope of his mystery...One of the most significant developments in Catholic understanding of the Christian mission in more recent times is its embrace of creation in all its beauty and vitality.¹⁹

Catholic Earthcare Australia (Earthcare) was established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference in May, 2002 and received its present Mandate in May, 2003. Earthcare invites all people of good faith to journey with it and work on the urgent and critical tasks of safeguarding the integrity of creation, protecting Earth's fragile ecosystems, and providing a voice for communities and victims of environmental degradation, injustice and pollution.

Earthcare works with schools, parishes, congregations and church agencies throughout Australia to achieve ecological sustainability.

The vision for Earthcare is to:

¹⁸ “The Church’s social teaching comprises a body of doctrine which is articulated as the Church ‘the unity of believers who form one body in Christ’ interprets events in the course of history..[and] proposes principles for reflection; it provides criteria for judgement; it gives guidelines for action.” Catechism of the Catholic Church Nos 2422-3.

¹⁹ Archbishop Bathersby, Launch of Catholic Earthcare Australia 30 June 2002

- stimulate and sustain ecological conversion;
- respect the central role of humankind in safeguarding creation;
- work towards making the life of all creatures more dignified;
- protect the radical goodness of life in all manifestations, especially human life;
- work for a sustainable ecology for present and future generations;
- discover the voice of the Creator transmitted in the natural world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ;
- celebrate the community of life;
- strive for sustainable development that seeks to overcome poverty and injustice;
- prepare an environment for future generations that is closer to the plan of the Creator.

The tasks for Earthcare include:

- Researching scripture and Catholic Social Teaching with the perspective of promoting the Catholic ecological worldview;
- Developing national networks, with a view to initiating, linking, resourcing and supporting ecological endeavours within the Church, and extending the hand of friendship and cooperation to other like-minded groups working in the broader community;
- Undertaking initiatives by encouraging a reverence for creation, a responsible stewardship of Earth's natural resources and ecosystems, and providing a voice for the victims of pollution, environmental degradation and injustice;
- Providing educational support, materials and services to Catholic schools, organisations, congregations and parishes – particularly information to assist in the carrying out of environmental audits and the implementation of more ecologically and ethically sustainable practices.

1. Why ASSISI?

- ASSISI has been initiated as a strategic **pathway** from the 'On Holy Ground' ecological vision to achieving ecological sustainability within the Catholic Church of Australia. The ASSISI framework is relevant and appropriate for all Catholic organisations and agencies, parishes and congregations.

- ASSISI is Earthcare’s response to the numerous **calls for ecological conversion**, including those from science and from theology. The ecological vision for Catholic Schools is captured in our foundational document, *On Holy Ground*. ASSISI provides direction and a coherent response in the form of a **model** to these calls for ecological conversion and Earthcare’s mandate to strive for ecological sustainability.
- Ecological conversion is **conversion of hearts, minds and hands**. This can only be achieved through an integration of different forms of knowledge: knowledge through reason (propositional knowledge); knowledge through experience; and relational knowledge (what Aquinas calls 'knowledge through love')²⁰, accompanied by reflection on that knowledge. These are the different wisdom traditions that Thomas Berry referred to, which provide common support to the Great Work. ASSISI is the **vehicle for this integration**.

2. Broad aim of ASSISI

The overarching aim of ASSISI is to provide a foundation for and a pathway to best practice in achieving ecological sustainability in Catholic schools, parishes, church agencies and religious congregations in Australia. The definition of ecological education which has been put forward for Catholic schools is relevant and appropriate for all Catholic organisations and agencies: *a life-long process of recognising values and clarifying concepts in order to develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness of all creation, and to know of creation as a gift from God which requires equitable sharing and right relationship. It also entails practice in decision making for living a life that is ecologically and ethically sustainable.*²¹

The approach we take in achieving our aim is not one based on compliance with externally imposed models and frameworks. The ‘learning communities’ approach involves a co-created process that enables organisations to work meaningfully with State and National frameworks and make autonomous decisions appropriate to their own context. This enables the ecological conversion required for full ownership and embedding of ecological sustainability into all aspects of organisational life in the context of, and in collaboration with, the broader community.

In order to achieve this broad aim, ASSISI will:

- From a school perspective, test and further develop, through an initial pilot programme, the frameworks for schools that have been developed and articulated in

²⁰ In *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (2007) Denis Edwards talks about the way of wisdom as being ‘knowledge through love’. It is the fruit of the Spirit of love at work in us

²¹ This definition of ecological education is taken from *On Holy Ground* Victoria

On Holy Ground. A single cohering framework that allows for regional variation is the goal;

- Apply a collaborative approach involving the broader community as a learning community, that enables a move from a compliance based approach to ecological sustainability, to full ownership of the sustainability initiative at local level;
- Develop a set of common principles, a model and generic framework (including an implementation plan), workshop and other materials, and a set of indicators, that can be adapted and used in Catholic schools, parishes, church organisations and agencies and congregations across Australia;
- Integrate with the State Government Sustainable Schools programs and other state-based and national initiatives as appropriate.²²

3. What does a Strategic Systems-Based Integrated Sustainability Initiative (ASSISI) mean?

- ASSISI is **strategic** in the sense that projects are linked to the strategic intent of individual organisations. Interventions in the area of sustainability in schools have until now been somewhat ad hoc and fragmented. ASSISI provides the opportunity for rolling out ecological sustainability in Catholic schools, parishes, organisations, agencies and congregations in a more systematic manner, with the broader strategic intent of reaching all schools, parishes, church organisations and congregations through a coherent and co-ordinated programme.
- It is **systems-based** in the sense that it involves the whole organisation and the broader community of which it forms a part. It also involves all aspects of organisational activity, in a participatory process.²³ Organisational planning, resources, grounds and building management, community networks, learning processes, and the whole religious dimension of the organisation are integrated for maximum (and broadest possible) educational and sustainability impact.

²² We have made significant progress in these four areas through the pilot process and are refining them further.

²³ See appendix 1 for the framework that incorporates all 6 inter-related elements involved in a whole organisation intervention. There will be networks of organisations and their broader communities, each cluster constituting a 'learning community'. Thus individual organisations will engage with the process, as will the entire 'learning community'. Steps 1 and 2 involve the whole community in an emergent, evolutionary and educational planning process that allows them to discern a way forward together. Thus the steps to ecological sustainability are situated in a bigger process of discernment, which allows for the possibility of a 'spirituality of communion'.

- It is **integrated** both in the sense that ecological content and values are integral to the initiative, and in the sense that ecological, theological, technical and educational perspectives are integrated through a focus on ecological sustainability. ASSIS is also aligned with and integrates the National and State Education for Sustainability framework (for schools) and with other relevant State and National sustainability initiatives (for church agencies and congregations). The involvement of the broader community from inception provides opportunity for service learning, project based learning, inquiry based learning, action research and learning, and other forms of experiential learning that bring ecological sustainability to life and serve to integrate the social justice dimensions.
- The Catholic call to embrace the philosophy of ecologically sustainable development and its associated call for sustainable living means that **sustainability** forms the core of ASSISI. The ethical principle involved is that “future generations should not be robbed or left with extra burdens for they have a claim to a just administration of the world’s resources by this generation” (drawn from 1990 World Day of Peace Message of Pope John Paul II).²⁴

Ecological sustainability constitutes both the content of the initiative, and the outcome of the initiative. In other words **core content and concepts** around ecological conversion and ecological sustainability will be woven throughout the organisation’s activities, resources and materials. In addition (and critical to ecological conversion), the **outcome** of participation in such projects, and the process of involving all members of the organisation in program design and materials development and other decision making around ASSISI, means that such practices will be sustained beyond ASSISI. The participation of a network of organisations (and the broader communities of which they form a part) in a learning community also ensures longevity of the initiative. This provides the basis for what has been termed ‘ecological praxis’.²⁵

- ASSISI constitutes the Australian Catholic Bishops’ sustainability **initiative**. It is an ongoing, large-scale intervention. It provides a theological, spiritual and practical **base for implementing** Earthcare’s ecological vision for Catholic schools, parishes and church communities, agencies and congregations. It is a useful **model and a roadmap**

²⁴ **Ecologically sustainable development** has been defined in the NSW Environmental Education Plan 2007-10 as “development that aims to meet the needs of Australians today, while conserving our ecosystems for the benefit of future generations of all species...**Sustainability** is the goal to be achieved through ecologically sustainable development”.

²⁵ Denis Edwards in *Jesus the Wisdom of God* (1995), and *Ecology at the Heart of Faith: the change of heart that leads to a new way of living on earth* (2006) uses the term when he talks about ways of being in the world ‘in creative partnership with God’, as co-creators.

for the way to achieve ecological sustainability for the Catholic Church in Australia.²⁶ There are six phases of development culminating in leading ecological sustainability.²⁷ These phases have been outlined in relation to the six areas identified in the ASSISI framework. There are nine principles of Earthcare that have emerged through the pilot process and these provide a guide for building collaborative relationships.²⁸

4. Goals of ASSISI for organisations and their broader communities

- That all members of the organisation develop values, beliefs and attitudes that manifest as an ecological vocation including seeing creation as a gift, having a relationship with our environment and a real sense of responsibility for its future;
- That the organisation, and the community of which it forms a part, develops awareness, knowledge and skills that facilitate whole of life ecologically sustainable decisions that improve our local, regional and global environments;
- That organisations undergo ecological conversion and achieve ecological sustainability in all 6 areas identified in the ASSISI model;
- That organisations develop ongoing reflection and learning processes that include monitoring, evaluation and sustainability indicators;
- That organizations undertake an audit of their ecological footprint including carbon, energy and water.
- That organisations develop relationships with other organisations and the broader community that foster ecological conversion and ecological sustainability;
- That organisations further develop a learning and collaborative culture within their organisation and as part of a broader learning community, as a product of participating in ASSISI;
- That, through participation as part of a learning community, organisations and their local communities continue to evolve creative ways of working together to achieve ecologically sustainable solutions to suit their particular contexts.

5. Benefits for organisations

The benefits for organisations include:

- The organisational community developing values, beliefs and attitudes that manifest as ecological vocation;

²⁶ See Appendix 1 for the ASSISI framework. Clusters of organisations and their broader communities will constitute ‘learning communities’.

²⁷ See Appendix 2 for the phases of development in each of these 6 areas, from awareness through to leading ecological sustainability.

²⁸ See Appendix 3 for the Nine Principles of Earthcare.

- An experience of ecological conversion as a product of the approach of co-creation and collaboration;
- The opportunity to embed ecological conversion and ecological sustainability in all materials, resources and strategy and planning processes;
- That organizations become well informed about their ecological footprint in order to provide the basis for strategic decision making about water, carbon, energy and other resources;
- That organizations develop their grounds and facilities to reflect the ecosystem in which they are situated;
- All members of the organisation working on real-life problems and outcomes;
- Professional development opportunities for all members of the organisation;
- The organisation as a model for sustainability within the local community;
- The opportunity to participate as a member of a learning community that involves not only the broader community of which the organisation forms a part, but a network of church organisations on a similar path.

6. How do we see ASSISI evolving?

- The collaborative learning communities approach, involving relationships with the immediate community and others, will ensure a coordinated, coherent approach to embedding ecological sustainability in Catholic schools, parishes, church agencies and religious congregations. As Bishop Toohey observed in his position paper on climate change: “we choose the path of dialogue, solidarity and cooperation that helps all sectors of the community go beyond sectarian interests, secular and religious differences”.²⁹
- Through the pilot initiatives we have developed a set of common principles, a model and generic framework (including an implementation plan), workshop and other materials, and a set of sustainability indicators for measuring success with regard to ecological sustainability over time. These will be continuously improved over time through a sustained process of reflection and learning, and used in Catholic schools, parishes, agencies and congregations across Australia. While Earthcare’s mandate is in the context of Australia, the work of ASSISI has been taken into the interfaith context nationally and internationally.
- Earthcare has embarked on a strategic partnership with Carbon Systems Australia to institute a system across the whole Catholic Church in Australia, in order to measure, track and report on energy, water and carbon performance on an ongoing basis. The Energy and Carbon Intelligence System (ECIS) is a low cost automated data collection tool for tracking, monitoring, benchmarking and reporting each Catholic organisation’s

²⁹ Paper presented by Bishop Christopher Toohey at the National Climate Change Conference in Canberra, November 2005.

ecological footprint. This provides essential information for decision making and driving reduction programmes.

- Learnings from the pilot initiatives will lead to modifications and adaptations for further roll out.
- This is a long term approach, inspired by Catholic teachings, values and beliefs, that is aimed at developing, implementing and monitoring the processes needed to facilitate the development of a spirituality of communion that is at the heart of achieving ecological conversion and ecological sustainability.

Continued studies of the universe have revealed that “*not only Earth but the entire universe has come into being through a long sequence of evolutionary transformations....The important thing about all these discoveries is that they led to an awareness of the unity of the universe within itself and with each of its components. It also led to the realisation that each component of the universe is immediately in contact with each of the other components of the universe. In this manner it could be said that in a scientific as well as a religious sense the small self of the individual finds its Great Self in the universe. These somehow exist for each other*”.³⁰

³⁰ Thomas Berry (1999) *The Great Work: our way into the future*