

Catholic Earthcare Australia

ASSISI for Schools

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 (Pope John Paul II, January 2001).

From this fact there comes what we might call their "ecological vocation", which in our time has become ever more urgent (Pope John Paul II, August 2002).

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".¹ 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.²

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*

¹ *Novo Millennio inuente* n. 42

² *Novo Millennio inuente* n. 43

*and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship*³. 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. 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 in response to this call that Catholic Earthcare Australia has initiated ASSISI, a sustainability initiative which places schools at the hub of sustainable communities. Sustainable communities are learning communities in living relationship with others, with God, and with all creation. This reflects what Thomas Berry identifies as the ‘great work’ of humanity in our time: “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”.⁴ 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 a number of schools to constitute a ‘learning community’, and engages with the broader community of which the school is a part, to build sustainable communities. ASSISI does not come with ‘solutions’ to ecological sustainability, but rather provides the learning infrastructure for schools, their local parishes and church organisations, 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.

Catholic Earthcare Australia: Responding to the call for radical conversion

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 conversion and ecological sustainability.

³ Novo Millenio inuente n.43

⁴ Thomas Berry (1999) *The Great Work: our way into the future*

The vision for Earthcare is to:

- 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.

1. Broad aim of ASSISI

The overarching aim of ASSISI for Schools is to provide a foundation for and a pathway to best practice in education for sustainability in Catholic schools. Ecological education in Catholic Schools has been defined as *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.*⁵

The approach we take in achieving our aim is not one based on compliance with externally imposed models and frameworks. Rather it is an organic approach that enables ‘learning communities for sustainability’ to co-create a process for schools 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 school life in the context of, and in collaboration with, the broader community.

In order to achieve this broad aim, ASSISI will:

⁵ This definition of ecological education is taken from On Holy Ground Victoria

- Test and further develop, through an initial pilot programme, the frameworks for schools that have been developed and articulated in On Holy Ground. A single cohering framework that allows for regional variation;
- 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 across each diocese in Australia. This generic framework will be modified for parishes, congregations and church organisations in collaboration with these organisations, who will participate in ASSISI as part of each learning community; and
- Draw from the State Government Sustainable Schools program.

2. Goals of ASSISI for Schools and their broader communities

- That the school community develops 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 school community, 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 schools undergo ecological conversion and achieve ecological sustainability in all 6 areas identified in the ASSISI model;
- That schools develop ongoing reflection and learning processes that include monitoring, evaluation and sustainability indicators;
- That schools develop relationships with the broader community that foster ecological conversion and ecological sustainability;
- That schools further develop a learning and collaborative culture within each school community and as part of a broader learning community, as a product of participating in ASSISI;
- That, through participation as part of a learning community, schools and their local communities continue to evolve creative ways of working together to achieve ecological sustainability to suit their particular contexts.

3. Benefits for schools

The benefits for schools include:

- The school community develops values, beliefs and attitudes that manifest as ecological vocation;
- An experience of ecological conversion as a product of the approach of co-creation and collaboration;
- The opportunity to achieve curriculum requirements in the key learning areas;
- Reduced consumption of resources and improved management of the school grounds and facilities;
- Teachers and students working on real-life problems and outcomes;
- Professional development opportunities for the whole school staff;
- The school becomes a model for ecological conversion and ecological sustainability within the local community;
- The opportunity to participate as a member of a learning community that involves not only the broader school community, but local parishes, church and other organisations.