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The Grace to Grow Deeper: A Case Study of Environmentalism in a Canadian Christian School

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Keywords

Environmentalism, K-12 Schools, Canadian

Cover Page Footnote

This research was partly funded by Cardus, a non-partisan, faith-based think tank and it was commissioned to supplement the Cardus Education Survey (CES) by providing narrative to the empirical data regarding independent school outcomes.

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Abstract

Successful environmental pedagogy in faith-based schools has not been well explored even while most Christian schools in Canada are governed by provincial curricula and provincial teacher standards that require commitments to environmentalism. Conflicts within mainline Christianity in regards to the importance of environmental justice may be why some Christian schools do not engage in environmental pedagogy (Mann & Schleifer, 2020). This study draws on data from one Christian school in the province of Ontario, Canada. The methodology used is case study approached through an Appreciative Inquiry lens – a methodology that is particularly useful in school-based research (Stavros et al., 2008). Practices used in this school include full school and community participation as well as strong, visionary leadership concerning “creation care”.

Introduction

Pope Francis released an encyclical (letter to people of the Roman Catholic faith) titled *Laudato Si'* (or “Praised Be”) in 2015. Here the Pope acknowledged the existence of human-caused climate change and global warming and recognized the shortcomings of the Church in protecting the environment. He called for international cooperation in protecting the planet. This encyclical was well-received by most Catholics and many Protestants, but not widely embraced by Evangelical Christians (Arbuckle & Konisky, 2015). Nevertheless, the Pope’s comments were a catalyst for many Christians around the world to reevaluate their current position on environmentalism. Hill (2016)

suggested, “Members of Judeo-Christian traditions” in the US are less supportive of environmentalism than non-religious individuals, suggesting that Evangelical Christians have “an even greater negative association between evangelicals and concern for the environment because of the strongly held belief in biblical literalism” (p. 5). The issue, however, is not as complicated for Canadian Christians, including Evangelical Christians, who generally support environmentalism. In fact, it is generally accepted that Evangelical Christians in Canada accept the stewardship model as a way to embrace the notion of creation care (Bede-Scharper, 2013, p. 10).

Education in Canada – public, independent, or private -- enjoys much consensus concerning 21st-century skills of creative and inquiry-based learning – “an education system that better engages students in their own learning and that fosters the skills and competencies they will need to succeed” (BC Ministry of Education, 2020). As such, we wonder what Canadian society needs from Christian schools. This article explores one Catholic school’s answer to that question – engagement in environmental justice. Environmentalism is highlighted in most curricula across the country. The school presented here displays creative ways to engage students and

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foster skills and understandings that students need in regards to environmental awareness.

In spite of the centrality of the Christian faith in the establishment and history of public schools in Canada, a rationale for Christian education is now both helpful and necessary, especially because many faith-based schools are supported by at least some amount of tax dollars. Also, there are declining numbers of adherents to the Christian faith in Canada as elsewhere, particularly among youth under 14 years of age, as well as millennials and post-baby boomers in the 25-45 age group (Clarke & Macdonald, 2017, pp. 122-162). Philosopher Charles Taylor (2003) articulated the rise of individualism during a secular age as the chief reason for the decline in church involvement. With little interest in Christianity itself, then, it is important to ask, What does our culture need from Christian schools today?¹ This question is foundational to our work presented here.

Our research is situated within a distinctively Christian approach to ethos, teaching and learning, and character development in the K-12 Christian education sector. The key architects of this approach are David Smith and James K. A. Smith (both at Calvin College, USA), Trevor Cooling at Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, and Archbishop Michael J. Miller, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Smith and Smith's (2011) and Smith and Cooling's (2017) research informed teacher education, professional practice and school leadership in North America and around the world. Their work encouraged reflection on how faith and pedagogy are interdependent and how teachers form individuals in schools and help them reflect a Christian social imaginary that can lead to cultural and societal engagement. Archbishop Michael Miller's research (2006) represented the Holy See, influencing Catholic education worldwide. He emphasized the need for Catholic schools, rather than counting on societies or institutions, to be animated by communion and community and seek to transform culture in light of the gospel. Though representing three countries, David Smith, James Smith, Trevor Cooling and Archbishop Miller contribute to a similar conceptual framework that

lends itself to a Christian approach to teaching and learning.

There are a range of empirical multiple-case studies with distinctly Christian approaches to teaching. Two recent studies are directly relevant to this project in using Appreciative Inquiry methodology:

- *The Impact of Distinctively Christian Education*, a three-year multiple-case study of 13 teachers at five Christian secondary schools in England. These teachers were implementing the What If learning approach in their classrooms; the study explored the impact of this Christian approach upon their practice (Cooling et al., 2016).
- *The Spiritual Influence of Christian Ethos* was a two-year multiple-case study of 10 leading Christian schools in England (K-12). The research investigated the nature of the spiritual influence of 10 Christian-ethos schools identified as leading within the larger educational sector and generated many case studies (Casson et al., 2017).

The Importance of Environmental Education in Christian Education

Schools across Canada have increasingly emphasized environmental education by guiding students to work toward healthy local and global communities for both present and future generations (Government of British Columbia, 2019; Alberta Council for Environmental Education, 2019; Ontario Ministry of Education 2019). We consider that Christian schools have a unique responsibility to promote environmental sustainability given the mandate of stewardship in the Christian faith: God made the world for humanity and humanity must care for the world. This idea is at the core of creation care. As noted, the leadership of the Catholic Church has emphasized the importance of this issue in recent years. Pope Francis highlighted the alignment of

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an environmental ethic with the Catholic faith in the third encyclical letter of his pontificate, *Laudato Si'*, in which he issued an “urgent appeal [. . .] for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (Bergoglio, 2015). Similarly, Kostamo’s (2013) general call to action for Christians had serious and compelling implications for Christian schools:

“We do not try to save the world: rather, we join in the saving work God has already begun. We become God’s co-labourers, co-operating with the Spirit in making all things new” (p. 18). According to *Citizens for Public Justice*, a Canadian national organization of members who are inspired by faith to act for social and environmental justice in public policy, “many Canadian churches and faith-based organizations have a long history of work in ecological conservation, environmental activism and advocacy for climate justice” (Munn-Venn, 2020).

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Lisa Kensler (2012) argued in *Ecology, Democracy, and Green Schools: An Integrated Framework* that successful environmental stewardship initiatives in K–12 education require whole-school systems. Other research indicated that, in particular, the success of a school’s environmental goals requires commitment from its leaders who play a crucial role in turning stakeholders’ environmental ideals into best practices (Barr 2011; Birney & Reed 2009). It is the alignment of sustainability values within the school, its culture, its curriculum, and the entire facility operations that enables whole-school commitment to environmental stewardship. That said, Christian schools do not necessarily have a unified position on environmentalism. Yet, when considering what

Western culture needs from Christian schools, it seems relevant and urgent for Christian education to lead on the issue of environmentalism rather than lag behind or deny the issue completely.

Methodology

This research was designed to examine attributes and best practices that may inform other Canadian and/or Christian schools in making Christian education relevant to Western society today. Yin (2009) defined case study as “an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). The particular school explored here is leading in the area of environmental pedagogy. We seek to present a rich description of this school culture where best practices have been well informed by recognizable frameworks in the education literature.

In keeping with educational research described in the *Accord on Research in Education* by the Association of Canadian Deans of Education (Butler et al., 2018), we too hope “to ‘unearth, elucidate’ the everyday life lived in [a] chosen schools, through the lens of the associated theme. By telling the story we seek to improve what is at [the] core: education in...schools” (p.2). The Accord stated the purpose of educational research as such:

Educational research is about improving what is at our core: education in and out of schools and across the lifespan. Educational research has an intimate relationship with everyday life. It unearths and elucidates the skills, strategies, and attitudes needed to address the frontiers of day-to-day learning. It addresses how we might approach our long-term needs, challenges, and imagined futures. (p. 2)

Using an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) lens in our case study research, we focus on the strengths of individuals and their organizations (Stavros et al., 2015, p. 97). AI is often used in school-based research for the very reason that we are using this approach: positivity and celebration of what is

going well is encouraging to the field of education as well as the school in particular. It creates positivity between researcher and the school (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018; Calabrese, 2015; Gordon, 2016; Tittle, 2018; Waters & White, 2015; Zepeda & Ponticell, 2018). According to Ryan et al. (1999), AI is effective because it “can be used to guide school reform within any school community – public or private, from the elementary through the secondary level” and assesses “the positive dimensions of a school’s culture, while simultaneously providing qualitative data that could help administrators and teachers. By emphasizing strengths rather than problems in schools, AI can avoid de-energizing teachers, staff, and administrators” (Ryan et al, 1999, p. 167). At a time when the need for hope is great, this is a highly effective strategy for intentional change. In a sense, an appreciative lens has Biblical underpinnings found in the book of Philippians (4:8, NRSV): “Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

As educational researchers at a Christian university, we have access to many Christian schools. Application packages were sent to a comprehensive database of Christian schools across Canada, inviting submissions in regards to exemplary practice. Twenty schools in total submitted complete packages; 11 were selected by a group of educational advisors, a strong committee with experience of whole school evaluation and good knowledge of the landscape. The Advisory Committee used a rubric for selection of the schools. The criteria included geographic region, type of Christian school, indicators of strengths in curriculum, teaching and learning, leadership and governance and community engagement. The chosen schools represented a strong balance of school sectors, geographic regions and particular strengths in educational practices. This paper focuses on one of these schools that we visited in the winter of 2019. Our approach to data collection was informed by the aforementioned previous studies in the UK in that we utilized similar tools of structured interviews, focus groups and a survey.

We interviewed and held focus groups with teachers and administrators, recognizing them as experienced participants who actively construct their social world. From these conversations, we were able to generate data to give authentic insight into the school. The resulting narrative represents a concern for “the synchronisation of meaning” (Cicourel, 1964) gleaned from observations and field notes as well as repeated listening of recordings and analyzing the interviews, focus group, and transcripts.

Our analysis was thematic, taking a loose approach to coding the data informed by the theoretical framework, the literature and the research issues identified in provincial policy round tables. The resulting data provides insight into what the teaching staff saw as working very well at their school. We recognize that case study research poses methodological challenges due to the complex social environment of schools and an almost immeasurable number of potential extraneous variables. Nevertheless, there are credibility measures for qualitative research built into the design used here, including survey data, investigator and methodological triangulation, member checks, collaborative work, external advisors, peer debriefing, audio trails, and thick detailed description.

Though somewhat mitigated by standardized processes and tools, validity of the data is influenced by the impact of the researchers on the setting, the so-called halo or Hawthorne effect (Hammersley, 1989, pp. 80-82), the values of the researcher, and the truth status of the respondents’ accounts (Silverman, 1993). Getting various perspectives, analysis of documents, and combining field and interview data reduced the halo effect and enabled us to make sense of the data as a whole. Respondent validation, that is, taking findings back to the subjects being studied helped to verify and more confidently confirm the validity of the resulting narrative. The thematic coding process of field data and transcripts and the context of the case studies was influenced by the researchers’ interests, values, and reasoning. What we noticed, the questions we asked and our emotional reactions are part of the inquiry process. Even enjoying the process of fieldwork, spending time in the school, and experiencing a

warm reception likely influenced our interpretations of the data.

In an AI approach where one is looking for what is working, this subjective interpretation is less problematic, but should nonetheless be noted. It can be partially explained through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, which requires that the writer adopt a principle of selection and theory of interpretation. According to twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2016), to make sense of texts is to acknowledge that “text implies texture, that is, complexity of composition” (p. xviii) and “puts us on guard against the illusion or pretension of neutrality” (p. 3). Therefore, the process of making sense of the focus groups and interviews as recorded in transcriptions was necessarily contextual, dependent on our interpretations. For example, the choice of quotes was dependent on their perceived usefulness to explaining the theme of the particular case study. Determination of usefulness was in turn determined by the assessed importance of the statement or action described in the quote, whether its relevance went beyond the initial situation and was somehow representative or pointing to the theme. Though limited by the length of time we were able to spend in each school, our efforts recognize how “every human science ...presupposes a primordial capacity to transpose oneself into the mental life of others” (Ricoeur, 2016, p. 9). Through a multi-dimensional approach and Appreciative Inquiry theory of interpretation, we were able to orient ourselves to the school, adding texture to the text.

The Greenest School in Canada

St. Margaret’s² Catholic Elementary School was designated “The Greenest School in Canada” in 2015 by the Canada Green Building Council, a not-for-profit organization promoting sustainable-building and community-development practices across Canada (Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, 2015; Canada Green Building Council, 2019). St. Margaret’s achieved this honour by reducing its waste by 90% over the course of several years, focusing on recycling and committing to composting. Plastic water bottles

and plastic bags were banned. Parents were asked to pack litter-less snacks. Organics were put in compost bags and recyclables in blue boxes. Since enrolling in EcoSchools, a voluntary environmental-certification program (EcoSchools Canada, 2019) 14 years ago, the school has reduced its waste from 13 garbage bags a day to one.

Environmental sustainability is valued in the culture of the whole school community. At all levels, students take active roles. Grade 2 students, for instance, serve as “Busters,” checking each classroom throughout the school and “busting” classes that have made mistakes in their recycling and reuse commitments. Each classroom contains recycling bins as well as GOOS (Good On Other Side) boxes, which store paper that is still useful. Busters give out tickets for improperly stored items. They also monitor and chart each classroom’s energy use, giving tickets to classrooms that have not turned off computer monitors or lights when not in use. The whole school participates in a point-gathering competition in which Buster tickets count against each classroom’s total, giving students an added incentive to avoid getting busted. All teachers and staff participate with full enthusiasm and the whole school atmosphere is good-natured and engaged with the idea of shared accountability and a shared goal. School and student leaders have also spoken at various events about their role in the school’s environmental efforts, including at a TED Talk at the Youth Eco Summit at Mohawk College in Hamilton.

In addition to the principal’s passionate and visionary leadership, one teacher at St. Margaret’s was particularly committed to the task of creating a green school; this ecology champion was identified by the other teachers as the point person for all matters concerning environmental efforts. This key person serves as focus and motivation for teacher participation. The school also has strong support from stakeholders, including the school administrative staff (included district leaders), teachers and supportive staff, students, parents, the neighbouring parish church, nursing students, other volunteers, the

² The school name has been changed for research purposes.

neighbourhood, and the city. Once a month, the school runs special alternative-transit days during which staff and students (with parental support) use environmentally friendly modes of transportation, such as walking or biking, to get to school. The entire school celebrates these yellow days with joyful outdoor gatherings.

St. Margaret's maintains an outdoor garden in which multiple school stakeholders are involved: the children plant in the spring; parents and neighbours donate plants and flowers; and children, parents, and community members all take part in watering throughout the summer and clean-up in the fall. If the school needs to remove a tree (such as for construction), another native-to-the-area tree is planted. The garden is meticulously maintained and so well embraced and appreciated by the neighbourhood in which the school is located.

The school's Christian faith is integral to its commitment to environmentalism. Quotations from *Laudato Si'* and banners for the current year's theme, as well as those from past years (themes such as Renewing the Faith or Faith in Action) are displayed throughout the school, highlighting the connection between living out one's faith and care for the earth/creation care. The Christian faith is presented here as holistic—the school community's initiatives are designed to care for everyone in every way possible. For example, the school has a uniform closet where outgrown uniforms are made available to all students, which is particularly helpful for students from lower socioeconomic homes. Several of the school's initiatives connect physical well-being and care for the environment. The principal said, "If it makes our earth better, it makes us better" (principal interview). Every year the school holds a Healthy Eco Fair, which draws hundreds of participants from the Hamilton area, including the mayor and the bishop. In addition, students with diverse abilities help with the school's nutrition program, delivering food baskets containing daily lunches and snacks for every student prepared by the student-nurses from a nearby college. The school's commitment to providing healthy lunches and snacks for each student not only keeps junk food away from students' diets, but also reduces plastic garbage from unhealthy packaged snacks and fast food. After completing a project

measuring the sugar content of drinks, students introduced a policy prohibiting juice boxes at the school. The school also has designated outdoor fitness times to promote students' physical health.

Clearly, the full commitment of teachers has been necessary for the success of environmentalism in the school. The principal emphasized that St. Margaret's creation care initiatives are a team effort, initiated by both students and teachers and supported by the entire school community. As one staff member insisted, "You can't do this sort of thing with just one committed person. Everyone has to buy in." As such, school unity appears foundational to the sustainability of ecological stewardship initiatives at St. Margaret's; its efforts to build community in other areas of the school are mutually reinforcing. The staff here believe that the "Eat Together" initiative, for instance, has been central to the success of the environmentally sound school culture. Students share meals inside the school. Their food is waste-free as much as possible, and no food is permitted on the school grounds during recess to minimize littering and to avoid attracting pests. College students in the area staff the kitchen that plans and serves meals that are healthy and environmentally sustainable. Students and staff eat the same school snacks provided through the nutrition program. The school nurtures a culture of hospitality as well: the principal and teachers are out in front of the school as students arrive and depart, where they also talk with neighbours who live near the school. St. Margaret's outdoor garden certainly creates a good network with members of the surrounding community, who appreciate the attractive gardens and the native trees that are planted and maintained each year. All such efforts create much community support for the school in the larger civic community. Community members attend the Healthy Eco Fairs and other special events, as do the many volunteers in the neighbourhood and church community who care deeply about the school, the children, and the faculty and staff and participate in special events.

The dedication of the school's principal—for which she received the Award of Merit for Distinguished Service to Catholic Education from the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board in 2018 (Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, 2018)—has been central to

the school's success. She reports that she wanted to be at this school because it was already established as a green school. In her five years as principal, she has encouraged involvement from all members of the school community: students join an eco-team and nursing students work on healthy initiatives and projects with the school. Teachers who have worked at other schools report observing a higher level of staff involvement at St. Margaret's compared to other schools they have taught at. The principal sees environmental education and practice as a way to give students hope for the world by empowering them with the awareness and ability to participate in the renewal of God's earth.

In addition, teachers emphasized the importance of kindergarten in setting the stage for the rest of students' school experience, insisting that a robust stewardship program in the early years is critical. Students are taught to practice environmentally sustainable habits in the classroom from the very start. They learn early to recycle paper, turn off lights, and not bring plastics to school. In such ways, St. Margaret's is a strong example of how a Christian school can embrace and even lead in environmentalism at school and to do so from within and because of the Christian culture of the school.

Discussion

The first implication of this research is for educators and school stakeholders to help students see a purpose beyond themselves. If schools are seen as communities of hope that care about each other and the larger world in which we live, then educators have a unique opportunity to advance environmental justice. Teachers can facilitate inquiry-based learning about the problems, disparities, and injustices in their own communities and help equip students with understanding, compassion, and motivation to take an active part in environmental justice. Furthermore, they can foster dispositions of humility and perseverance so that students grow in courage and step into the messiness of environmental challenges. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's (2013) views on the secular age and individualism help to contextualize why helping students see a purpose beyond themselves is so important: "...the dark side of

individualism is a centering on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society" (p. 4).

D. Smith's (2018), K. A. Smith's (2016), and Miller's (2006) ideas of Christian teaching echo Taylor's philosophy and, each in their own way, resonate for a pedagogical context for environmentalism in Christian schools. Taylor (2013) argued that there is less concern for others and society and less civic engagement in Western culture. He contended that excessive individualism in a secular age requires people lead their own lives and not necessarily see a common responsibility to intervene or help others. As such, Christian schools can serve as a response to such disengagement by engaging in wider social issues, like environmentalism. The coming together as a school with a singular purpose pushes against such individualism. Environmental pedagogy can serve as a way for Christian schools to give back to the larger Canadian culture. This is what our culture needs from Christian schools today: sustained communities of care for society and the public good.

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Christian environmental education is part of a Christian anthropology of what it means to be human. Authors Gunn et al. (2013) argued, “Through a sense of wonder with creation we are invited to seek insights into God’s will for a just society, a fair economy, and a flourishing land” and that “creation advocacy is essential for faith communities today” (pp.1, 3). This lens and compelling call to action differentiates Christian from secular education in the framing and response to the challenge. Environmental issues go to the heart of the Christian faith in that they relate to God as the origin and end of everything and speak to how we live our lives, how we care for others and love our neighbour, how we use technology, and how we establish economic systems and cooperate in global concerns. The National Indigenous Anglican Bishop of Canada, Rt. Rev. Mark MacDonald (2013) explained that the Law of Life

perceives all of creation as a God-given, living and symbiotic community; since it has a familial quality to it, perhaps it may more adequately be described as a communion.... A good life, a moral and spiritual life, breathes through the way we cherish the whole of life, its various creatures, and its Creator. (p. 64)

By extension, this means that a Christian education must encompass a profound sense of communion and interconnection of the created and the Creator.

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The second implication is the importance of visionary leadership. Solid, clear, supportive, and

collaborative leadership is vital. As at St. Margaret’s, needed are champions of environmentalism who work collaboratively with others and help motivate and care for the issue as an extension of their Christian faith. Educational leaders who demonstrate an ability to empower generativity equip others to do the work with them. Moreover, their ability to resource through encouragement, mentorship, and advocacy allows the impact of their work to multiply. The principal gives the vision: she selects an issue related to the world at large, understands the common good and motivates through service to growth and betterment of others. She continuously makes environmental justice a priority through words and actions as she sees the issue related to the dignity of the human person and the value of community. The teachers all combine in their lives and work with students “the full development of individual potentials with commitment to a greater whole” (Gardner et al., 2001).

This research tells the story of one committed Christian school implementing promising practices and reflecting Brookfield’s (2017) notion of “critically reflective leadership” in the area of environmentalism/creation care. Critical pedagogy is pivotal when addressing environmental pedagogy. Critical reflective leadership means paying attention to the social, political, and economic implications related to all social issues, including environmental justice, and can be a vital part of our understanding of Christian education.

Conclusion

Through the use of Appreciative Inquiry, case studies of Christian schools can reveal some of the good things that Christian schools are doing for the common good, connecting Christian education with global justice issues, such as environmentalism. Highlighting what one Christian school in Canada is doing well can inspire educators elsewhere. This research suggests that changes in school culture begin to take hold when they are supported by an engaged school community and led by passionate, visionary leadership in regards to social justice issues.

Christian schools are encouraged to create collaborative networks of cooperation and critical dialogue among school stakeholders when it comes to environmentalism and creation care. Working together facilitates the sharing of common values and a shared foundation regarding collaborative growth. The sharing of good ideas through an Appreciative Inquiry lens can increase consistency of approaches and practices as well as build capacity and generate a professional knowledge culture in Christian education. A shared understanding could result in more efficient and effective resourcing and delivery of education in Christian schools. Such a shared vision of creation care has the potential to bring us closer to our shared ideals about the moral development of the person in Christian schools. If done well, Christian schools can nurture important Christian and Canadian values for the good of society as well as for the individual. Our guiding question to this research has been: What does our culture need from Christian schools today? This case study suggests that community and leadership concerning environmentalism in schools can indeed be foundational elements to Christian schooling. Environmentalism in Christian K – 12 schools can be a meaningful addition to Christian approaches to teaching and learning that contribute to the larger Canadian community. Society needs Christian schools because they have the potential to provide unique leadership for some of society's pressing problems, such as environmental degradation.

Society needs Christian schools because they have the potential to provide unique leadership for some of society's wicked problems, such as environmental degradation.

Prayer for Creation

O Lord, grant us the grace to grow deeper in our respect of
 And care for your Creation.
Lord, hear our prayer.

O Lord, help us to recognize the sacredness of all of your
 Creatures as signs of your wondrous love.
Lord, hear our prayer.

O Lord, help us turn from the selfish consumption of
 Resources meant for all and to see the impacts of our
 choices on the poor and vulnerable.
Lord, hear our prayer.

Retrieved from
<https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/sustainability-prayers>

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