

Earth as Our Home



Image: www.millenniumassessment.org

Too often when we hear the word 'house' we only think of a physical building and its rooms. But what if we began to think of the *Earth* as our house — with various rooms — what would we need to do to make this 'house' a true 'home'?

*A project of
Catholic Sisters for a Healthy Earth*

INTRODUCTION

*"The family needs a home, a fit environment in which to develop its proper relationships. **For the human family, this home is the Earth** — the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility. We need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion."*

- Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace message 2008

The word **ecology** has its roots in the Greek words "oikos" meaning house or household and "logos" meaning to gather, count, recount, say, speak. Ecology is understood as the legend or logic of the dwelling place. In its essence it is the story of where we live. This story of the house instructs us and informs our actions in managing this household we call Earth.

Too often, when we hear the word "house" we only think of a physical building and its rooms. Henry David Thoreau once said, "What is the use of a house if you haven't got a tolerable planet to put it on?" What if we were to become aware of **Earth as our home**? How would we care for this home differently than we do now? What relationships would we need to form in order to keep this home healthy for all its inhabitants? What would we do differently in managing this larger household?

In this booklet we offer reflections on the various rooms of a house, placing each room and its activities into the broader context of our Earth-home. Simple actions are suggested about how to live more sustainably and walk more gently on this Earth.



PORCH

"When strangers start acting like neighbors... communities are reinvigorated."

- Ralph Nader

Porches are a symbol of the transition between the private, individual area and the public, communal area of our lives. Porches are the bridge between outdoors and indoors.

Porches invite us to slow down, sit a spell and pause from the hustle and bustle of life to enjoy all that we have and are in this moment. Their physical space invites us to create and be grateful for the spiritual space in our lives. They allow us to invite neighbors and passersby to engage in conversation.

Porches allow us to partake of nature's cooling breezes, the scent of her blooming flowers, her myriad stars twinkling in the night sky and the cheerful songs of her birds.

Do we know our neighbors? How can we create porches in our lives that help us connect our individual life with the life of the community and that connect the outside world of nature with our indoor lives?



POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Spend some quiet, reflective moments each day on your "porch" and note what you learn about yourself, God, your neighborhood and God's creation.

Participate in a neighborhood Welcome Wagon program to help orient newcomers to the people and sites.

Organize a "progressive dinner" - or other shared activity such as a picnic or game day- in your neighborhood that becomes a tradition and part of the neighborhood identity.

GARAGE

"When will we learn to say: 'Enough!?' When will we direct our focus away from what we want to what the world needs? When will we understand how important it is to leave as light a footprint as possible on this planet for the sake of future generations? We must choose to care."

- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

In the past, a home's one-car garage was separate from the house and was used to store the family car or truck. In many newer homes today, the garage makes up one-third of the house and is prominently attached on the front of the house, becoming the entrance to the home, obscuring the front door to the activities of the neighborhood.



In the U.S., 82% of homes have two car garages or larger. More and more of us are using the space for extra storage instead of for our cars.

As you enter the journey each day with your Creator, be aware of the needs of many people in our world. Look around and see if there are things you could do without so you become more dependent on God rather than on things.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Patriarch Bartholomew suggests that we turn our focus away from what we want to what the world needs. As you reflect on his words, what becomes clear to you about the needs of the world?

Go through your possessions and see if there are gently used items that could be taken to a thrift store so others in need may benefit.

LIVING ROOM

"One of the most glorious messes in the world is the mess created in the living room on Christmas day. Don't clean it up too quickly. "

- Andy Rooney

The living room is a place where families can relax, watch television, play games, discuss important issues, greet and entertain guests. Some homes have a single room usually called the living room, whereas others have another less formal room called the family room. Each functions as a place where the life of the family unfolds.

For a family with young children, laughter, wrestling and occasional arguing occurs. A quieter atmosphere will rule when only adults live in the home, although this tranquility may be punctuated by chaos when grandchildren or young neighbors visit.



Conversations in the living room might include serious topics affecting individual family members, the entire family or the broader community. Conflicts can be addressed, behavior taught and moral values explored. Lessons on living community are taught by example as we make a life together.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Reflect on families who are homeless or without other basic needs who have little space for quiet conversation or play. Choose a way you and your family can help local homeless families.

Gather with family and/or neighbors to study how the changing environment is likely to affect you, your children and grandchildren in the future. Create and implement plans to recycle, to reduce your use of fossil fuels and to reduce your carbon emissions.

Check out your household carbon footprint: <http://1.usa.gov/MIgCa0>

KITCHEN

"The shared meal elevates eating from a mechanical process of fueling the body to a ritual of family and community, from the mere animal biology to an act of culture."

— Michael Pollan, *"In Defense of Food"*

The kitchen is the heart of the home. It is where we feed the body and cater to the soul.

In ages past, the kitchen table was a place of dialogue, friendship and support as family and friends sat around the table snipping beans, peeling apples, cooking from scratch and building community while sharing a cup of coffee.



These home cooked meals have been replaced by processed, packaged and microwave meals. Taking the time to cook together, choosing to go meatless, buying locally grown foods, bringing in your own garden produce or eating only what is in season are ways to honor food and the need for all to eat. Eating becomes a spiritual act when done mindfully.

The real cost for food is not considered today. As Norman Wirba writes in *Eating in Ignorance*: "The sticker price does not reflect the cost to eroded and chemically laden soils, poisoned and depleted waters, the burning of vast quantities of fossil fuels, abused animals, abused farm workers, poorly treated and poorly compensated food-service providers, and the myriad number of diet-related diseases that are causing health-care costs to skyrocket."

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Limit your food choices to what comes from within a 50-mile radius of your home or community.

Practice meatless Mondays! Check out www.meatlessmondays.com for recipes.

Stop disease by saying no to pesticides that inhibit plants from building their own immunity/nutrients and are then passed on to us as we eat them.

DINING ROOM

"When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him..."

- Luke 24: 30-31

Food is critical to our faith and central to Jesus and his community of friends. Breaking bread and healing go hand in hand. Holidays dinners, birthday parties, welcome cookies and funeral casseroles are more about relationship than eating.

Picture your favorite dining table—is it round with equality? Is it long with a head and foot as special places of honor? Is it a potluck where everyone contributes their best? Is it a casual place with friends or family?

Food is the foundation for communion -- the act of becoming bread for the world. Eucharist is generous, deeply rooted in Earth and miraculously connects us with God.

There has been a steady increase in the number of people who go hungry. This is due to: 1) neglect by governments and international agencies of agriculture relevant to very poor people; 2) the current worldwide economic crisis, and 3) the significant increase of food prices which is devastating to those with only a few dollars to spend.



POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

As you pray your meal blessing, silently hold your plate and gaze on the wonder of food. Give thanks for the fruit of Earth and the work of human hands.

Notice how you as family, friends or community dine. What becomes important to you?

Read the newspaper or listen to the nightly news—what do you sense are the struggles around issues of food? Price? Availability? Childhood obesity? Genetically modified foods? Address one.

YARD

"Every one of us can take action in our own yard to help conserve global biodiversity, expand our urban forests, mitigate climate change, and at the same time make life richer and more fulfilling for our families and ourselves."

- Evelyn J. Hadden, "Beautiful No-Mow Yards"

We are faced with much environmental damage and an alarming rate of species extinction. We have experienced water shortages and water polluted with fertilizer run-off. Our soils have been poisoned with pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals. Our lawns are filled with a single plant that does not provide nutrients for any wildlife or humans.

How do we view our lawn/yard? Is it a showcase of only manicured short green grass? Is it a place where children play? Is it a place where adults gather and visit? Does it have a variety of colors and shapes? Is it a place where birds can be heard singing? Where humming-birds and butterflies bring delight to young and old alike? Do the sounds and sights of our lawn fuel our imagination and feed our souls?



POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Grow your own food by using some lawn space for an edible garden.
Share any extra produce with a neighbor.

Explore putting in a rain barrel or butterfly garden.

Plant shade trees to provide shelter from heat and homes for songbirds.

Look for plants that are more sustainable, that grow deep roots for more water retention, put nutrients back into the soil. Use species native to your area for greater resiliency and sustainability.

BEDROOM

Sabbath, in the first instance, is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one's life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being.

- Walter Brueggemann

The bedroom can be a little corner of the world that turns into a sanctuary. It is here where we have a bed for resting or intimacy with a spouse, as well as space for personal needs, prayer or meditation.

This quiet time away from the busyness of life, this time of just "being" is part of the rhythm of life. Sleeping allows us to dream and regenerate our spirits, ready to engage with the world when the new day dawns. Without such purposeful times of "being" we cannot be about the "doing" of each day.



The bedroom can also become a window to the world allowing us to see that we are deeply part of this world. When we look out our bedroom window, what do we see? Perhaps we see the night sky, radiant with sparkling stars and the moon lighting up the sky. Perhaps it is the rising sun bouncing off the river to greet us. It is the view of God's creation, a pure vessel that ascends from silence. It is here that we realize that we are not alone.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Let your room be a place of solitude where you can quiet your mind, truly rest and perhaps hear your inner voice or the voice of God to guide you.

If you have a television in your bedroom, turn it off. Sit in the quiet or play meditative music in your sacred space. Close your eyes and experience yourself in the loving presence of the Creator.

BATHROOM

Bathroom Prayer

*We praise and thank you, Lord
for the gift of living water.
Guide us to use it wisely,
learn from its humility,
consume it sparingly,
and protect its purity.*

-Br. Cathal Duddy OFM



In the U.S. the average middle class family home has two bathrooms. Most homes have at least a one-and-a-half bath with many newer homes having a private bathroom for each bedroom.

In early history the bathroom was not even part of the house. It was a little building away from the house. Baths were usually taken in a big tub in the kitchen. This meant that the water had to be drawn and heated.

With the invention of indoor plumbing, homes were built with just one bathroom that was used by all the members of the family. The bathroom now had a

sink, toilet and bathtub. These were initially considered a luxury as there now was running water indoors. Sanitation is a basic need that for many people throughout the world remains an unobtainable luxury.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

As you take a shower or relax in a nice warm bath, think about those who do not even have running water in their homes, nor access to fresh water. Remember we in the U.S. bathe and flush our toilets using drinking-quality water.

Two-thirds of the water used in the home is used in the bathroom. Keeps a water journal for a week recording all the ways you use water. Look for ways to conserve water and begin to do so today!

ATTIC

"Don't store up treasures here on Earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them... Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be. "

- Matthew 6:19-21

In homes built with pitched roofs, the space between the roof and the ceiling of a building's top floor is known as the attic. An attic is generally an awkwardly shaped space with a slanted ceiling and corners that are difficult to reach. Because of their inaccessibility, attics often provide residents with a place to store items that are considered unessential, unfashionable or unnecessary.

In literature, an attic is often seen as a space for retreat and contemplation. Because it is a place in the home where unused but valued items are kept, there is the sense that attics also shelter secret dreams and hopes. Most of us do not have an attic getaway space that we can access, but with a little search there is probably a place where we can be led to the treasures of our hearts.

POSSIBLE ACTIONS:

Earth has no attics for storage. In fact, she has no real "away" for the things we throw away. As we store up things, are we only delaying the time when we will want to empty out our storage spot?

Find ways to recycle and repurpose those items you are storing before they rust or get eaten by moths.

Name a place that gives you cause for contemplation. Find a place where Earth calls you to find treasures to nurture your heart and visit it frequently.



INTERNET RESOURCES

25 Steps Under \$25

Inexpensive ways to reduce your carbon footprint.

bit.ly/13BY1qO

Eating Well Guide

Enter your zip code to locate local stores, farms, organizations, etc. within a few miles of where you live.

eatwellguide.org

Edible Landscaping Ideas

From the National Gardening Association

garden.org/ediblelandscaping

Where to Recycle Just About Anything

Answers to all your recycling questions.

earth911.com/recycling

Energy Star

Improving the energy efficiency of your home.

energystar.gov

Household Carbon Footprint Calculator

Learn how to estimate the greenhouse gas emissions of your home.

1.usa.gov/14JAOzV

Calculate Your Water Footprint

How much water does your home really use?

on.natgeo.com/12ZNVgm

Responsible Shopper

Promoting a more sustainable economy.

greenamerica.org/programs/responsibleshopper



Image: Kathleen Storms, SSND

FILMS

Films for Change

A list of environmental films from the International Society for Ecology and Culture.

bit.ly/1ac108t

Grinning Planet's list of environmental films

A listing of environmental films organized by subject.

bit.ly/12EI9h0

Journey of the Universe

An exploration of the interdependent web of existence in the cosmos.

journeyoftheuniverse.org

An Inconvenient Truth

Uncovering myths and misconceptions about climate change.

takepart.com/an-inconvenient-truth/film

Food, Inc.

An exposé of how our nation's food supply is controlled by a handful of corporations that often put profit ahead of consumer health.

takepart.com/foodinc

Bag It—Is Your Life Too Plastic?

Learn how our use of plastic affects our environment, marine life and human health.

bagitmovie.com

Story of Stuff

A short animated film about the life cycle of material goods and excessive consumerism.

storyofstuff.org

Carbon Nation

An optimistic documentary about climate change solutions.

carbonnationmovie.com

Nourish

How food connects to such issues as biodiversity, climate change, public health, and social justice.

nourishlife.org/about/the-film

BOOKS

Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things

Minimize the environmental impact of high consumption by examining closely the things that are consumed daily.

by John C. Ryan & Alan Thein Durning

The Better World Shopping Guide

Every dollar we spend makes a difference in the world at large.

By Ellis Jones

The Christian Consumer

How to live faithfully in a fragile world.

by Laura Hartman

America's Climate Century

What climate change means for America in the 21st century and what we can do about it.

by Senator Rob Hogg

The Omnivore's Dilemma

A hard look at today's food industry and the moral ramifications of our eating habits.

by Michael Pollan

Voluntary Simplicity

Change your life by embracing frugal consumption, ecological awareness, and personal growth.

by Duane Elgin

Spirit of the Prairie: Catering to the Soul

Incorporates many practices that are good for Earth, along with nutritious and easy recipes.

by Kathleen Storms, SSND

Super Natural Home

Learn how to eliminate toxic chemicals lurking in your home.

by Beth Greer

The Joy of Less, A Minimalist Living Guide

How to de-clutter, organize, and simplify your life.

by Francine Jay

ORGANIZATIONS

Environmental Working Group

A leading environmental health research and advocacy organization.

ewg.org

Green Faith

An interfaith coalition dedicated to environmental leadership.

greenfaith.org

Interfaith Power & Light

Responding to global warming through the promotion of energy conservation, energy efficiency, and renewable energy.

interfaithpowerandlight.org

Climate Reality Project

A global cultural movement demanding action on the climate crisis.

climaterealityproject.org

Food and Water Watch

Advocates for common sense policies that will result in healthy, safe food and access to safe and affordable drinking water.

foodandwaterwatch.org

Catholic Climate Covenant

Care for creation. Care for the poor.

catholicclimatecovenant.org/

Center for a New American Dream

Reducing consumption to enjoy the quality of life.

newdream.org

Suddenly, from behind the rim of the moon, in long, slow-motion moments of immense majesty, there emerges a sparkling blue and white jewel, a light, delicate sky-blue sphere laced with slowly swirling veils of white, rising gradually like a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery. It takes more than a moment to fully realize this is Earth...home."

- Edgar Mitchell, astronaut

Our Mission:

Respecting the interdependence of creation, we will promote eco-literacy and influence a just relationship with the environment.

Catholic Sisters for a Healthy Earth is made up of representatives from the following congregations of women religious:

Congregation of the Humility of Mary, Davenport, IA
chmiowa.org

School Sisters of Notre Dame, Central Pacific Province, St. Louis, MO
ssndcp.org

Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, Sinsinawa, WI
sinsinawa.org

Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, IA
bvmcong.org

Sisters of St. Francis, Clinton, IA
ClintonFranciscans.com

Sisters of St. Francis, Dubuque, IA
osfdbq.org

Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Dubuque, IA
dubuquepresentations.org



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