

# As the world burns before our eyes, the Vatican fiddles



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**F**AITH, WE were taught back in religion class, could move mountains. The mountains are indeed moving, but today the hills are alive with the sound of high explosives as coal corporations literally blast the tops off mountain ranges such as the Appalachians, creating Dante-esque new landscapes of toxic sludge.

Ice mountains are also on the move. Last weekend, an ice bridge holding in place a chunk of Antarctica half the size of Scotland collapsed and slid into the South Atlantic. The speed of the breakup shocked even seasoned scientific observers.

Whether or not you have religious beliefs, and almost irrespective of what creed you subscribe to, the fact remains that Creation is unravelling. In September 2007, Pope Benedict urged Catholics to act "before it's too late". In a symbolic gesture, the Vatican installed solar panels. Climate change, the pontiff intoned, was of "grave importance to the entire human family".

Like many other leaders, the pope talks a good fight. However, despite its formidable diplomatic clout, the Vatican City doesn't participate in UN climate conferences, nor did it sign up to the Kyoto protocol. Clerical disengagement with reality is even more acute closer to home. The Irish hierarchy has now been mulling over a pastoral letter on climate change for the last two years.

It should be published "sometime this year", a spokesman told me. Quite how Maynooth could slumber through humanity's profoundest existential crisis must count as one of the sorrowful mysteries. The Catholic Church, explains theologian and ecologist, Fr Seán McDonagh, simply doesn't take environmental matters seriously.

"It would appear many church leaders believe that, while sexual matters must be dealt with . . . environmental problems can be put on the long finger", McDonagh wrote recently. As the world burns, the Vatican fiddles. Its opposition to birth control means that, despite the useful work of church groups such as Trócaire, it is more part of the problem than any solution.

In pre-Christian times, history was generally viewed as a series of cycles, with no special meaning or direction. For the bulk of our existence, humans did not innately see themselves as

different to other creatures. Many traditional cultures in fact worshipped animals as divinities. Man was of this world.

Human consciousness came about as a side-effect of our developing language. From this consciousness sprang religions and dreams of immortality; it also marked a schism in our relationship with the physical world. The rise of Christianity in particular promoted the view that man was entirely separate and superior to his fellow creatures, and imbued with a God-given dominion over them. The Book of Genesis sets out humanity's new covenant with the world in stark terms:

"Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you . . . the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth . . . upon all that moveth up the earth, and upon the fishes of the sea; into your hands are they delivered".

And how. In the new Christian age, all that mattered was man's relationship with God. All other living things were reduced to mere commodities. Dissenters, such as Francis of Assisi, were sidelined.

As author Clive Ponting described it, "Christian theology produces a highly anthropocentric view of the world which was to have a profound and enduring impact on later European thought, even when it was not specifically religious".

For the last five centuries, the world has been largely shaped by Europeans. Our values, culture and philosophies have been spread, often at gunpoint, to every continent. Scientific advances were frequently co-opted in support of the dominant religious philosophy. The notion of nature as a mere machine, and of man being morally free to "perfect" and exploit the natural world took firm root from the 18th century.

The concept of progress, driven by technology and science (and subsidised by the massive inflows of wealth to Europe via the plunder of its colonies) gradually came to be viewed as inevitable. Economist John Stuart Mill wrote of nature: "Her powers are often towards man in the position of enemies, from whom he must wrest, by force and ingenuity, what little he can for his own use".

In tandem with this predatory view of our relationship with nature ran the notion that without us humans, the world itself had no intrinsic purpose or meaning. This astonishingly egotistical conceit could only be propped up by our viewing ourselves as in some way divine. Gods of the earth, if you will.

Bearing witness to the truth, according to Paula Clifford, head of theology at Christian Aid, means taking hard choice and telling it like it is. "If we choose to protect our current privileged lifestyles at the expense of our fellow human beings and the world around us, that is truly sinful."

A powerful spiritual plea – and admonition – was expressed by Chief Seattle of the Squamish tribe in 1854, in a letter to the US president:

"Teach your children what we have taught our children: that the earth is their mother. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit on the ground, they spit on themselves. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth . . . whatever he does to the web of life, he does to himself."

As Easter approaches, it's worth recalling Jesus's own words: "What you do to the least of these, you do to me."