

THE COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE: 11 YEARS LATER



My nephew Andrew visited us from Chicago last week. What do you show a teenager that he will appreciate and keep him engaged? We opted to drive through the Columbia River Gorge; perhaps the falls and the windsurfers are “cool.” I showed him a photo of Crown Point — the cover of *The Columbia River Watershed International Pastoral Letter* — so he’d have an idea of what to expect. Holding this also reminded me of the power this seminal document still has 11 years after it was written.

In *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* the Catholic Bishops of the Region explored the “teachings about stewardship; the need to respect nature; and the need to recognize and promote the common good.” They noted that “The core of the 259,000 square miles of the Columbia Watershed is the 1,200 miles of the great river known as the Columbia.” Eighty miles of the Columbia River rests within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.

The bishops acknowledged that “throughout the past century industrial development provided needed goods and jobs in the watershed and beyond.” Then they added, “Sometimes this development has resulted in harm for the watershed.” Indeed, “Pope John Paul II instructs us that ‘[There should be a priority of] the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion’ (Canada, 1984).”

I pondered efforts to preserve this environment as we drove east on Highway 84. The river water rippled with whitecaps — a windsurfer’s paradise — yet still a perfect mirror of the late afternoon sun. I wished I weren’t driving because nothing would have been more pleasing than to gaze out the window and reflect.

“The Columbia River and its tributaries are intended by God to be living water: bountiful and healthy providers for the common good. The water itself is to be a clear sign of the Creator’s presence.”

I recall these words as we pass Cascade Locks. Cascade Locks is the site of a proposed privately-owned bottling plant that would bottle as much as 100 million gallons a year of Oregon spring water. We do we need bottled water? Tap water is as safe as bottled water; in fact bottled water has become a luxury for almost all of us. In an article about the University of Portland’s ban on all disposable plastic water bottles, the Catholic Sentinel noted “because water being sold in disposable plastic water bottles is part of a process of privatization of water resources, the sustainable purchasing decision not to buy or sell disposable plastic water bottles also fits into the Catholic belief, as stated in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, that water cannot be treated as a commodity and that access to water is a universal and inalienable right. (Catholic Sentinel, March 16, 2011)”

“In the concept of the common good, community and individual *needs* take priority over private *wants*...”

On this day in the Gorge the air is clear, blue with a hint of haze. It is easy to recognize God and God’s handiwork on a day like today along the Columbia River.

As one voice the bishops proclaimed a prophetic vision: “In our idealized ecological vision we see the Columbia Watershed community inhabiting an environment of clean land, clear water, and pure air.”

“In the vision, the peoples of the region are conscious of their stewardship responsibilities. [F]actories that...release clean emissions and cleaned effluents into the environment.”

I wonder what color the sky would be if the States of Oregon and Washington grant permission to mining companies to transport the coal mined in Wyoming through the Gorge to ports in St. Helens, Longview, Boardman and three others for export to Asia. *The Oregonian* reports that “In 2010, trains unloaded about 80 million tons of freight in Oregon and Washington. At full capacity, the six export projects would add more than 150 million tons of coal. That tonnage would require 50 to 60 trains a day, counting return trips, with many likely funneling through the gorge.(July 2, 2012)” (Each train carries up to 145 uncovered cars.



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We drove past a stationary train that pulled at least 85 cars. At 70 miles an hour, we drove at least 45 seconds before we could see the river again.)

The bishops reminded us that “the vision for the future of the watershed extends to mine owners and managers who are seen as operating with a consciousness of their responsibility to care for creation and respect local community needs...They assure that mining processes do not endanger waters and aquatic life or pollute the air or land.”

We stopped in Hood River to watch the kite boarders and the wind surfers, to gaze out upon the mighty Columbia River and to eat dinner at Full Sail. As I ate outside on the deck for a view of the river, I understood that we are blessed and spoiled to have this natural treasure close enough to enjoy.

If the coal isn't transported through the Gorge by railway, then the coal designated for export from the Port of St. Helens will be loaded onto barges in Boardman, Oregon and transported up the Columbia River.

Boardman lies beyond the end of Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The PGE Boardman Coal Plant, which is scheduled to shutter in 2020, is the second largest point source emitter of mercury in Oregon.

The U.S. Bishops recently welcomed first-ever national standards to reduce mercury and other toxics from power plants because children, inside and outside the womb, are uniquely vulnerable to environmental hazards and exposure to toxic pollutants in the environment. (Letter to the Environmental Protection Agency, Bishop Stephen Blaire, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2011)

The Catholic bishops affected by the Columbia River Watershed had articulated this principle ten years earlier: “The first and primary good to be preserved is the good of the individual person. Human life is sacred and the good of the community demands respect for that life. Environmental degradation can be particularly harmful to the unborn, the young and the elderly. The life in the womb is precious. The life of the elderly person is precious. The life of the disabled person is precious. The life of the seriously infirm person is precious.”

PGE Boardman's emissions also contribute to regional haze. The pollutants from the plant are carried by winds into the eastern half of the Columbia River Gorge, producing haze that limits visibility and has deleterious effects on the economy. In the Columbia Gorge, 95% of the days are marked by impaired visibility, or haze. These pollutants likely caused the haze that discolored the sky as I drove through the Gorge.

The Catholic Bishops caution all parties, individuals, industry, and workers, to be respectful of each other. “Industry must respect people and nature and take particular care to be cognizant of its impact on the common good. People must exercise a basic respect for one another, for God, for other creatures and for the environment. Individuals also need to respect the rights of others, including those engaged in agriculture, mining, forestry and the like.” Indeed, Catholics are not environmentalists first; we are called to respect creation *and* humanity, to protect the environment and the community.

It is unquestionably paramount that Christians treat each other with respect. Loving our neighbor demands that of us. Respect, however, does not require one to ignore the teachings of the Catholic Church. While each party must act with respect, Catholics cannot ignore the words of Pope John Paul II “Christians, in particular, realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith.” (The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility.)

I don't know if my nephew Andrew thought that the Columbia River Gorge was “cool.” I wouldn't dare guess if he appreciated the awesome beauty of Gorge or if he saw God as he looked out at the Columbia River. That is, unless years from now he pays a return visit and finds this national scenic area sooty, scarred by railroad cars and river barges, with waters that belong to a private company at the detriment of the community and the common good. Then he might reflect upon our trip, what this community once had, and that it had been “cool.”