

Understanding of creation story affects how one lives on earth

By Sister Bernadine Casey

For human beings to be in a right relationship with the divine and with each other, they must be in a right relationship with earth, air, water, soil and all the living forms which make up their "larger self," said the Rev. Michael Dowd at the recent Sacred Earth Associates' presentation, "Earthcry: Call to Humanity," at Gonzaga University.

"Just as Copernicus' discovery that the earth revolves around the sun required a shift in people's thinking in medieval times, so this cosmology calls for a shift in thinking now," he said.

A cosmology, he explained, is the lens through which a people see everything. Peoples everywhere have a cosmology, or creation story, that helps them understand the origin and meaning of life and causes them to relate to the world in different ways.

"From their world-view of earth as Great Mother or Home of the Great Spirit, native Americans could not have conceived as possibilities the buying and selling of land, developing a bulldozer or splitting the atom," Michael said.

The cosmology of the West, built on a straightforward reading of the creation story in Genesis, he said, is that humans are separate from and superior to the natural world, placed on a ready-made earth by a transcendent God with whom they are to be in a right relationship. They are stewards of earth, with dominion over it.

This biblical perspective gives rise to the thinking that if people are separate and superior, detached from a natural world that is fallen and flawed, material and physical, what they do to earth is neither

of integral importance nor necessarily an ethical issue, he said.

"Now, however, we are coming to understand that we are a dimension of the universe, organic parts of a larger, living body, just as we are the larger body for our heart, liver or kidney cells.

"So our alienation from the world has created our present ecological mess," he told participants at the event, co-sponsored by various civic and religious organizations including the Spokane Christian Coalition.

"It is inadequate to see environment merely as an issue along with other issues such as homelessness, AIDS, drug abuse, peace, or justice. The environment—ecology—is the context for all the issues. If the planet does not survive, there will be no other issues to worry about. Extinction is forever," Michael said.

Eight of the hottest years ever recorded have been since 1980, and the ozone hole appears to be spreading over North America," he said, citing the need for creative response to the problems of global warming and acid rain and quoting statistics on top soil being lost throughout the world, commercial chemicals entering the environment, toxic wastes being dumped into rivers, oceans and the ground, and forests, plants and animals being destroyed.

"This crisis is the only thing to force humanity into setting aside all differences and petty concerns, and bonding together to save the planet," he said.

In western culture, power has meant power over and security has meant being able to create a dominant defense. So power has become equated with invulnerabil-

ity, he said.

"However, we are like nerves in a neuro-net, which derives its power from the interconnectedness of all its systems. One neuron can be powerful only if the body is powerful. If one neuron built defenses around itself, it would atrophy and the health of the body would suffer."

How power and security are understood, therefore, will make all the difference in the future, for the view that any nation-state can be secure without the whole being secure can no longer be held, Michael said.

For 300 years, progress has been understood as exercising control over the forces of nature for the benefit of humans. In the last 100 years, western science has made massive strides in learning about the natural world. Suddenly, in this century, "scientific observation in such fields as astrophysics, bio-chemistry, chemistry and astronomy show that some assumptions are inaccurate," he said. Telescopic observations and mathematical calculations, for example, fix the age and size of the universe as enormously greater than people had supposed from dates in the Bible, and show that it is expanding in all directions at ever-increasing speeds. This, he explained, indicates three things about the universe: It is in a continuous process of differentiation, or of becoming always more various; every atom has an organizing dynamic or way of being that makes it itself and not something else; and the whole thing is a community functioning like an organism with everything connected to everything else.

"Humans, integral parts of all

this, are to be in harmony with it. As consumers, however, we are literally eating up the earth, just as a cancer cell—cut off from its genetic memory and not knowing who it is or how to behave in harmony with the rest of the body—grows exponentially and consumes that of which it is a part. It kills itself when it consumes its environment.

"To encourage people to conserve natural resources for moral reasons, because we 'ought to,' is ineffective. Sermons seldom deter us from pursuing our self-interest, so we need to be more enlightened about what our self-interest is and conserve out of self-defense. We don't save the rain forest for its medicinal properties for ourselves but because it is needed for the health of the planet. The trees in the Amazon are our external lungs and the rivers are our external blood streams, so what we do to earth, we do to ourselves."

The present economic system, which "builds on the assumption that we should continue to have economic growth," Michael said, "does not account for extractions from the earth in profit/loss ledgers. The Gross National Product is the efficiency and speed with which we take, make and waste things. From earth's perspective, that is insane. If we have a recession or a depression, we call it a set-back. When the economy makes an upturn, we get excited. All it means is that we're killing the planet more effectively.

"Much of what we've called 'development' is planetary suicide. We need to be careful about words like 'sustainable growth,' because if we have development

for humans at the expense of the natural world, human life will collapse."

It is important, however, not to rush into environmental activism, trying to fix things before shifting lenses, lest the problems worsen, Michael advised.

"Essential to our survival is the shift from a human-centered to a life-centered perspective, seeing the earth as an extended self just as an athletic team to which we are intensely devoted is a kind of extended self whose loss or win is our loss or win."

This pastor of St. Paul's United Church of Christ in Woodfield, Ohio, said this understanding is in line with the biblical creation story. "The perspective sees God at the very center of things, inherently present from the beginning. Even modern physicists and biologists talk about a divine ordering principle, a self-organizing dynamic of the universe, a mysterious reality that is the ground of all things—traditionally understood as God," he said.

Michael's book, *Earth Spirit: a Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*, shows that this viewpoint opens up the deeper meaning of "the core elements" of Christian faith—such as sin and salvation, the Kingdom of God, heaven and hell, Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

"It has been freeing to me to realize I didn't have to quit being a Christian to have a profound earth-oriented spirituality," said Michael, formerly an evangelist with the Assemblies of God. "Now my work is to show how profoundly this fits with and stretches the understanding of Christianity's traditional truths," he said.