

# INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

## A Sacramental Vision Summary

*From the Indiana Catholic Conference*



### Introduction

We, the Bishops of Indiana, offer *Integral Ecology: A Sacramental Vision* to expand on our previous teaching to Indiana Catholics, namely “Care for the Earth” (2000) and “Poverty at the Crossroads” (2015). The National Eucharistic Congress, held in Indianapolis in 2024, gave us a beautiful example of the love of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. The concept of **integral ecology** unites all these themes and helps us understand how human and natural ecology are interrelated.

Here in Indiana, we delight in the natural world, filled with a multitude of natural features: a Great Lake, rivers, streams, forests, prairies, wetlands, caves, sand dunes, and farmland. We are at home in this natural world yet also keenly aware that we are pilgrims journeying to our true home in heaven. Therefore, we are citizens of both creation (ecology) and of the Church (ecclesiology). Our particular home is a parish, which is rooted in a geographic place in the natural world while also rooted in the ecclesial order.

The Eucharist unites all the faithful into the one Body of Christ, the Church. It also gathers what is created (wheat and grapes) and offers it to the Creator himself. Indeed, “the Eucharist is the fulfillment of integral ecology,”\* where the human and natural are united in Jesus Christ himself.

### The Theology of Watersheds and Creation

Our ecological citizenship encourages us to understand that our homes are situated within a watershed, which is that area of land that sheds off its water to form a river. Most of the watersheds of Indiana eventually drain into the Ohio River, which joins the Mississippi River and empties into the Gulf at New Orleans. The smallest of many Indiana tributaries are connected to water that mingles with the oceans of the Earth.

Our common modes of living in a technological, digital, and urban age can drastically impact our ability to live well as earthly and heavenly citizens. While technology may have the ability to enhance our knowledge of the created world, a physical encounter with nature is what most transforms our ability to see the natural world as the prophets and saints did. A sacrament is a sign that points to a reality beyond itself, nature is a sign that points to God’s presence and loving care.

### The Natural and Human History of Indiana

Knowledge of the natural and human history of Indiana helps us better appreciate the beauty of our state, understand our place with-

in the created world, and reflect on our use of the goods of the Earth.

Most of Indiana’s landscape resulted from the last Ice Age, which ended around 10,000 years ago. The glaciers left behind abundant ground water, rich soils, and the flat land that make up the northern two-thirds of the state. Indigenous peoples, including the Potawatomi, Miami, Shawnee, Wyandot, and Kickapoo began inhabiting Indiana following glacial retreat.

The first Europeans in Indiana were French fur traders and Catholic missionaries. In 1834, Pope Gregory XVI, established the diocese of Vincennes which was renamed and moved to Indianapolis in 1898.

At the time Europeans first entered Indiana, they encountered primarily natural areas—forests, prairies, wetlands. Today, less than 1 percent of these natural areas remain. Changes to the natural environment reflect Indiana’s population growth: from 5,600 in 1800 to an estimated 6.9 million in 2024.

### Understanding Human Impact on the Natural World

#### *Biodiversity and Habitat Loss*

Our best knowledge today shows that humans are indirectly and directly driving to extinction some of the creatures entrusted to our care. Since the settling of Indiana, a few native species are now extinct, and dozens more are no longer found in Indiana or are considered endangered or threatened.

One of the most drastic ecological changes in Indiana since its settling is the loss of wetlands. The Grand Kankakee Marsh, once one of the largest wetlands in the world, was prolific with plant and animal diversity and abundance. Only 3 percent of the marsh remains after drainage and conversion to farmland began in 1852. Wetlands once covered about 24 percent of the state; today, only 0.03 percent remains.

#### *Agriculture*

Although Indiana is the smallest continental state west of the Appalachian Mountains, it is the ninth largest farming state in the country. The Church recognizes the vocation of farming to feed the human community but also points out the side effects of mechanization and other technological changes to increase food production. As the Bishops of Indiana, we advocate for farming that meets both human and ecological needs. Good farming does not degrade farmers and farmland nor animals and livestock. Rather, it restores relationships and treats people, land, and ani-

mals in accord with their God-given way of being.

Eating food is not merely about bodily nourishment. It is also about human relationships and communion. The Eucharist is a redemptive meal that restores us to friendship and communion with the Trinity. This heavenly meal is connected to the natural world; the “fruit of the earth” and the “fruit of the vine” become the body, blood, soul, and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. The constitutive elements of sacramental bread and wine come about through sunshine, rain, soil, seeds, wheat, grapes, farmers, vintners, and agricultural laborers.

### *Water*

Water gives life. It renews and refreshes. Our lives as Christians begin with the “clean and natural” water of Baptism. However, Indiana has some of the most polluted water in the country; 73 percent of streams/river miles are impaired and not suitable for full body contact. The impact of water quality on human health is considerable: decades of industrial pollution remain in rivers and channel sediments. *E. coli* contaminates almost 75 percent of Indiana streams and rivers, nutrient run-off from agricultural fields leads to serious problems.

Research on the long-term environmental impact, and the health effects of contaminants’ accumulation in the human body, is ongoing. Forty-five percent of drinking water sampled in the United States has detectable contamination—which can be transferred from mother to child in breast milk.

### *Human Fertility, Marriage, and Family Life*

Atrazine, the second most commonly used herbicide in the United States, is an endocrine active chemical (EAC) that poses significant risks to plant and animal communities, including the feminization of male animals and the disruption of male sexual development. Atrazine in drinking water has also been associated with reproductive and developmental health problems in humans.

The most active and potent EAC is the synthetic estrogen found in the birth control pill. Experiments have shown that the addition of this synthetic estrogen at levels found in natural bodies of water caused fish populations to crash. The impact of these synthetic chemicals on the natural environment and human bodies is significant and intertwined with the Church’s teaching on married life and human sexuality.

### *Energy Production and Consumption*

While fossil fuels, particularly coal, have provided a stable source of reliable energy for 175 years, have supported the welfare of many Hoosier families, and have bolstered Indiana’s economy, current estimates indicate that world coal resources will be depleted in about 100 years and that natural gas and oil supplies will be depleted in about 40 years. Burning fossil fuels effects human health (e.g., asthma, cancer) and environmental health (e.g., air/water pollution) far beyond local impact to regional and global levels. As we assess the current situation and look to the future, it is prudent to develop renewable energy sources while recognizing the limits of any technology.

## **Cultivating a Serene Attentiveness**

After addressing only some of the many challenges facing Indiana in caring for our common home, we, Bishops and teachers of the faith, focus primarily on a spiritual renewal that is foundational for all other responses to our ecological and human challenges. After all, the primary cause of the current ecological and social crises is a human heart enclosed in upon itself, alienated from God, neighbor, and creation. The conversion experience that we propose includes the following:

- We must recover our ability to rest on the Lord’s Day, which can help renew our ability to encounter creation.
- We, like Adam, can share the joy of naming God’s creatures, by getting to know those creatures that exist around us within the watershed in which we live.
- We must cultivate an attitude of “serene attentiveness” to God, ourselves, neighbor, and creation. We encourage parishes to celebrate the newly established Mass for the Care for Creation and to engage in prayer and in action during the Season of Creation (September 1-October 4).
- We must open our hearts to communal responses to caring for our common home, including learning from individuals and institutions in Indiana who have already taken concrete steps to better live in harmony with their natural environment. These actions can include installation of solar panels, cultivation of sustainable farms/gardens, and ecological restoration/reforestation.
- We encourage parishes, schools, institutions, groups, and individual people to engage the *Laudato Si’* Action Platform (LSAP) established by the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. LSAP provides a structure for people to assess their relationship with both natural ecology and human ecology and to make commitments to actions that sustainably care for our common home.

## **Conclusion**

Biblically, our human life originated in the Garden of Eden, a Paradise of holy and just relationships among God, ourselves, and creation. Gardens are places of life, death, and rebirth that connect us to the Paschal Mystery of Christ in the Eucharist. May we learn daily to cultivate the garden of our hearts, so that the Holy Spirit might find fertile ground for the bearing of much fruit.

**A complete list of references contained in this summary may be found in the full text of *Integral Ecology: A Sacramental Vision*.**

\* Christopher Thompson, *The Joyful Mystery: Field Notes to a Green Thomism* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017), 173.