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Canada bishop questions morality of oil sands development

Rich Heffern | May. 29, 2009 NCR Today

The Canadian Catholic bishop for the region around Alberta's massive oil sands project questions the "moral legitimacy" of their rapid development. The destructive effect on the environment that would result from such development "is against God's plan for the earth."

In a pastoral letter, Bishop Luc Bouchard says the earth is a gift that, undamaged, allows people to sense God's existence. "Therefore, even great financial gain does not justify serious harm to the environment," he writes.

Surface mining of oil sands, environmentalists say, destroys large tracts of boreal forest, pollutes water and will soon contribute far more carbon dioxide to the environment thatn all of Canada's passenger cars combined.

"Any one of the above destructive efforts provokes moral concern, but it is when the damaging effects are all added together that the moral legitimacy of oilsands production is challenged," states the letter.

"The moral problem does not lie in government and industry's lack of a sincere desire to find a solution; the moral problem lies in their racing ahead and aggressively expanding the oilsands industry despite the fact that serious environmental problems remain unsolved after more than 40 years of on-going research."

The first step, Bouchard suggests, is stopping further development until real solutions can be found. In addition, "people need to be protected, including First Nations who hunt and fish in the region and those in the area who lack social programs and infrastructure."

The Catholic church's stance on protecting the environment is nothing new, Bouchard says. He quotes Pope Benedict's 2007 statement that "disregard for the environment always harms human co-existence and vice versa."

Bouchard, whose diocese serves 55,000 Catholics, has also written pastoral letters on a number of other issues, including legalized gambling in the province.

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