

CASA CARES

PUTTING ECOTHEOLOGY INTO PRACTICE

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Abstract

Casa Cares has operated for 25 years as a meeting centre of the Waldensian Church, the historical Reformed church of Italy. In part due to its care of 4 hectares of farmland, 5 hectares of woods, and an historical villa, the centre is sensitive to environmental issues and has invested resources and effort in these issues. There are many implications for a hospitality facility. The presentation will speak to the everyday realities of an environment-friendly, Christian guesthouse, including why and how Casa Cares came to this commitment. Although not an ecovillage, Casa Cares is a supporting member of the Global Ecovillage Network and therefore we have insight into the work of the Network members as well an overview of the life of the 66 centres in the Ecumenical Association of Academies and Laity Centres in Europe, of which it is also a member along with the Orthodox Academy of Crete. An emphasis will be placed on ethics and the foundation for a practical application of ecotheological principles. Opportunities and limitations will be highlighted with the hope of stimulating a discussion around the realities of practical applications of Christian and environment-friendly concepts in an Italian enterprise, which is to be basically self-supporting.

Keywords: Environmental ethics, green guesthouse, Ecotheology in practice, practical ecology, faith and environment

1. Introduction

The presentation planned for the June 2008 International Conference on Ecological Theology and Environmental Ethics offers a practical, life style experience as the basis for an exchange among participants. There is much to be learned from scientific research and technical progress, but with its emphasis on 'Eco-Theology' the conference brings together committed individuals from many countries. It is valuable to find the time to confront and enrich each other regarding emphases and approaches in local and national faith communities.

The object of attention is a guest facility in Central Italy but the purpose is to use the facility as a door opener to discussion among participants on questions of personal experiences, attitudes, approaches, and involvement. There is place

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for sharing concerns, fears, and disappointments as well as visions, hopes, and successes.

2. Casa Cares – ‘Centro Ecologico’

This statement regards the development of Casa Cares as a meeting centre and guesthouse interested in and committed to the care of creation and to the promotion of that care. It is meant to present the work of Casa Cares to anyone involved in the life of the centre and to give a foundation and direction to future efforts.

2.1. Why Ecology

Considerable attention has been given in recent decades to the topics of Ecology and environmental care. Persons who have had access to and studied just some of the great amount of what has been said and written can easily begin to understand the dimension of impact which humanity, for the first time in its history, has had on its environment and the importance for an asserted effort to understand and direct that impact [1].

Environmental care is an issue which demands the urgent attention of both the public and the private sectors. Certainly the Christian churches are called to be sensitive to this issue and to assume a responsibility for what is bequeathed to future generations [2].

2.2. Why Casa Cares

For several reasons Casa Cares dedicates itself to environmental issues. The rural setting of the centre implies contact with nature and with food production. The care of five hectares of woods, four hectares of olive-treed terraces, and a vegetable garden requires on-going involvement with the realities of land management and offers a direct relationship with the natural world, something which is lacking for many persons in today's industrialized societies. The separation of people from the land can be considered a contributor to the ignorance and disinterest shown toward environmental issues. Casa Cares has an opportunity to reopen the door for many people to the world of nature and to care for the land.

Casa Cares finds itself in a local setting where there is a growing awareness for environmental issues, but one in which at the same time there has been little initiative politically or privately to speak to these issues. The population growth since 1975, primarily due to persons intent on escaping from city life, has been significant and constant. However, this search for ‘green’ has not yet had many obvious consequences for the local community outside of a stress due to consumption of resources and to construction.

Nationally there are many persons interested in environmental issues, and fortunately many Italians are not detached from their rural roots, but those deeply committed seem to remain few and are frequently set at the fringe by public opinion as peculiar idealists. An example of this is found in politics, where the green parties are attached to one pole, a situation which does not foster the idea that environmental care is the responsibility of all citizens.

Despite broad appreciation for its investment in many causes, the Waldensian Church has had neither clear ideas nor a strong voice in what the World Council of Churches and the Council of European Churches regard as the deep interrelationship among Peace, Justice, and the Integrity of Creation. There is room for a contribution. Another point which supports Casa Cares' dedication to environmental issues is the accumulation of experiences, contacts, and written material since its reopening in the mid-'80s. Guests who feel comfortable in the simplicity of Casa Cares' setting often have a special sensitivity to and understanding of these issues. Many times they offer to collaborate.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that the physical care of the I Graffi property, both the buildings and the land, is in itself care of the environment. This can underline an appreciation for what was entrusted to us through the tremendous effort of hundreds of workers over the centuries.

2.3. Implications of the choice

Casa Cares' interest in environmental issues has been obvious to many guests and friends. It is hoped that a clearer declaration of this interest will invite greater attention internally and open doors to broader exchange and cooperation with persons outside the Waldensian community.

The implications of the choice to dedicate the centre to environmental issues are many and complex. As with a religious choice, with which many comparisons are possible, lifestyle is called into question. Simplicity, sustainability, and downshifting are some terms that can guide the development of a lifestyle on both institutional and personal levels. The primary work of the house, that of hospitality, offers many practical challenges in an environmental sense, but also many opportunities. Care of the environment is challenging on many levels, and there are many potential conflicts in the operation of a business that must be efficient and, outside of major reconstruction, self-supporting. It is a positive point that the experiences of Casa Cares take place in the 'real world' and as such might be applicable in other settings.

The work of the centre could take many directions, all of which involve considerable time and effort. Casa Cares could, for example, become a centre for documentation, research, model development, encounter, and dialogue. However, person power available to the house is limited. Labour on the land, which is not conducive to mechanization, provides a constant reminder of the time and physical effort required by commitment to the environment.

The commitment of which this statement speaks refers to a starting point and process, not a rigid rule. Relevant exchange among personnel, guests, the management board, church members, neighbours, and any others involved in Casa Cares' work is essential. The final word is not to be one of disaster, but one of hope. Future generations are the beneficiaries of today's efforts.

References

- [1] N. Myers (ed.), *Gaia. An Atlas of Planet Management*, Pan Book Ltd, London, 1985.
- [2] L.L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1996.