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Abuse of creation

Sharon Abercrombie | May. 14, 2010

Workers use heavy machinery in the tailings pond at the Syncrude oil sands extraction facility near the town of Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada, in October 2009. (AFP/Mark Ralston)

Joe McMorrow never paid much attention to Syncrude Canada?s oil sands extraction project in Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada, prior to 2000 because the company maintained just two plant sites then. ?Somehow at that level, it was manageable,? explained McMorrow, a permanent deacon at St. Jean Baptiste Parish in Morinville near Edmonton, and volunteer social justice coordinator for Alberta?s St. Paul diocese.

Oil sands, also known as tar sands, or extra heavy oil, are naturally occurring mixtures of sand or clay, water, and an extremely dense and viscous form of petroleum known as bitumen. They are found in large amounts in many countries throughout the world, but are found in extremely large quantities in Canada and Venezuela.

About eight years ago, however, McMorrow, who was then a Fort McMurray resident, discovered that Syncrude Canada was expanding. More and more of Fort McMurray?s lush green boreal forests were degenerating into ?a wasteland. It was just huge.?

Most of that oil from the desolate moonscape goes south to the United States.

The oil sands extraction sites in Fort McMurray and nearby Fort McKay and along the Athabasca River are the world?s biggest oil deposit after Saudi Arabia, according to a 2009 *National Geographic* article. The U.S. Energy Information Administration identifies the sites as ?consistently the top supplier of U.S. oil imports.?

McMorrow was not the only one who has continued to worry. Yes, many young people were benefiting from the high-paying jobs in the oil industry, Chipewyan Chief Allan Adam conceded last year. ?On the one hand, oil sands are good for the economy, good for jobs, but bad for our health and bad for our way of living. People are dying,? he told Joe Bianchi, the writer for a policy briefing paper, ?Indigenous Peoples and Oil and Gas Development,? issued last year by KAIROS, Canada?s ecumenical church agency. Deaths of young people in their 30s and 40s have been linked to the oil sands, the paper said.

The report underlines tribal members? concern about the increase in crime, social problems, substance abuse and family violence, in addition to an increase in traffic and air, water and noise pollution.

Besides the sickness in humans, wildlife suffers as well. Two years ago, 1,600 birds died in Syncrude Canada?s hazardous waste tailings ponds.

Within Catholic circles, during the past couple of years environmentally conscious activists urged St. Paul Bishop Luc Bouchard to speak out.

In January 2009 Bouchard wrote a pastoral letter, ?The Integrity of Creation and the Athabasca Oil Sands,? challenging the moral legitimacy of the project. He called for a moratorium on new operations and expansions until adequate environmental protection measures are established.

Bouchard?s missive flew directly to the point. ?The ecological crisis is evident in many parts of Canada. Our wasteful consumerist lifestyle, combined with political and industrial shortsightedness and neglect, are damaging our air, land and water. ... It is impossible for me to ignore the moral problem created by the proposed $150 billion oil sands developments ... because projects are in ?my own backyard? and have aroused strong ethical criticism,? he wrote.

Oil sands extraction, said the bishop, is a complex operation, and apart from the environmental issue of polluting one barrel of water in order to produce a barrel of oil, the toxicity of the tailings ponds also represents a long-term threat to the region?s aquifers and to the quality of water in the Athabasca River, due to the danger of seepage or a sudden catastrophic failure of a pond?s enclosure.

Natural gas is also a factor, according to the bishop. ?Very large amounts of it are required to heat water in order to process bitumen. By 2011 it is estimated that the then existing oil sands plants will burn enough natural gas to annually release 80 million tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. ... Alberta produces three times more per capita greenhouse gas emissions than the Canadian average and six times the West European average,? Bouchard wrote.

The bishop made it clear that he was not directing his critical points to those who work for the oil companies but rather to ?oil company executives in Calgary and Houston, to government leaders and to the general public whose excessive consumerist lifestyle drives the demand for oil.?

?What is urgently required are moral vision and leadership,? he continued, saying that the future development of the oil sands ?is a serious moral problem? to environmentalists and Native communities ?who are challenging the oil industry to adequately safeguard the air, water and boreal forest ecosystems and the Athabasca River.?

Referencing Catholic theological principles supporting environmental ethics, the bishop referred to the

continuous unfolding of earth?s creation as sharing in the fulfillment of Christ?s redemption. ?This is what we pray for when we say, ?Thy kingdom come.? To abuse creation therefore constitutes a lack of faith, a type of despair, or even a blasphemy.?

Bouchard?s letter has since provoked a flood of reactions, both positive and negative, from Canada as well as from the United States and Europe.

?The pastoral letter definitely struck a nerve,? he said. Responses ranged from ?decisively negative and even insultingly reactive, to appreciative and supportive reactions.? The most negative responses were generally anonymous, mostly replies to news pieces that appeared on Web sites or blogs. One comment in an opinion piece read, ?Kindly tell Bishop Bouchard I will stay out of his God business if he will stay out of the oil sands business.?

Another reader advised the bishop that he should be worrying about the pedophiles in the church instead of the oil sands. ?You can tell he is not worried about a paycheck,? wrote yet another reader.

Bouchard said these negative responses ?never disputed that serious damage is taking place? in the oil sands. ?What is disputed is that a religious person has a right to raise the issue when the economy of Alberta is possibly at stake.

?Their central refrain is: How dare anyone challenge our economic system? Their refusal to recognize the legitimacy of a bishop posing a moral question to his own church members are personal attacks that link me with every current or pat scandal in church history.?

Other opponents, government and industry persons who identified themselves as such, skillfully used public relations language coupled with a refusal to address the moral questions. One exception, according to the bishop, was a letter written to the *Calgary Herald* by the CEO of Syncrude Canada. ?He said any moral assessment of any industrial development needs to also include the social good that the project creates by way of jobs and the creation of a product that is publicly demanded,? said Bouchard. ?This, I thought was a valid response.?

Bouchard also received many responses in the form of personal letters from ordinary people, bishops, priests, environmental activists and scholars. ?These letters were overwhelmingly understanding, warm, supportive and positive.?

Bouchard was named one of the 50 most influential persons in Alberta by the business magazine *Alberta Venture*. The last sentence of its article said, ?Bouchard set out to incite debate. Mission accomplished.?

Officially, the Canadian church has been on top of environmental issues, publishing three bishops? letters during the past 10 years, said Bob McKeon, associate director of social justice for the Edmonton archdiocese. ?So now we need to look at them and what they mean in the here and now.?

This is the current challenge for McKeon and other activists -- to help people in the pews to expand their faith formation to take in environmental issues, he told *NCR* in a telephone interview. Despite the public attention Bouchard?s letter has generated, his views are still ?not the majority opinion in Alberta.?

McMorrow agreed that ?probably very few of the local population in Fort McMurray are struggling with the oil sands as a moral issue. Most Catholics there do not have the time or inclination to individually fashion a moral ethic. They are too busy working for a living,? McMorrow observed, adding that the oil companies are ?good employers, pay well and are socially progressive.?

Meanwhile, 270 miles away from the oil sands in Edmonton, Alberta?s capital city, McKeon is making efforts to introduce some environmental education into this deep sea of contradictions, a sea ?where industry remains our foremost economic driver in the conversation.?

This past February, he organized a ?Lunch and Learn? series in Edmonton?s Diocesan Pastoral Center for working people. Forty people turned out to discuss the Christian response to creation. ?There was a real openness on their part.?

[Sharon Abercrombie, a frequent contributor to *NCR*, writes from Oakland, Calif.]

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