

**“A New Creation in Christ”:
Dreams for the Boreal Region of Northern Ontario**

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ:

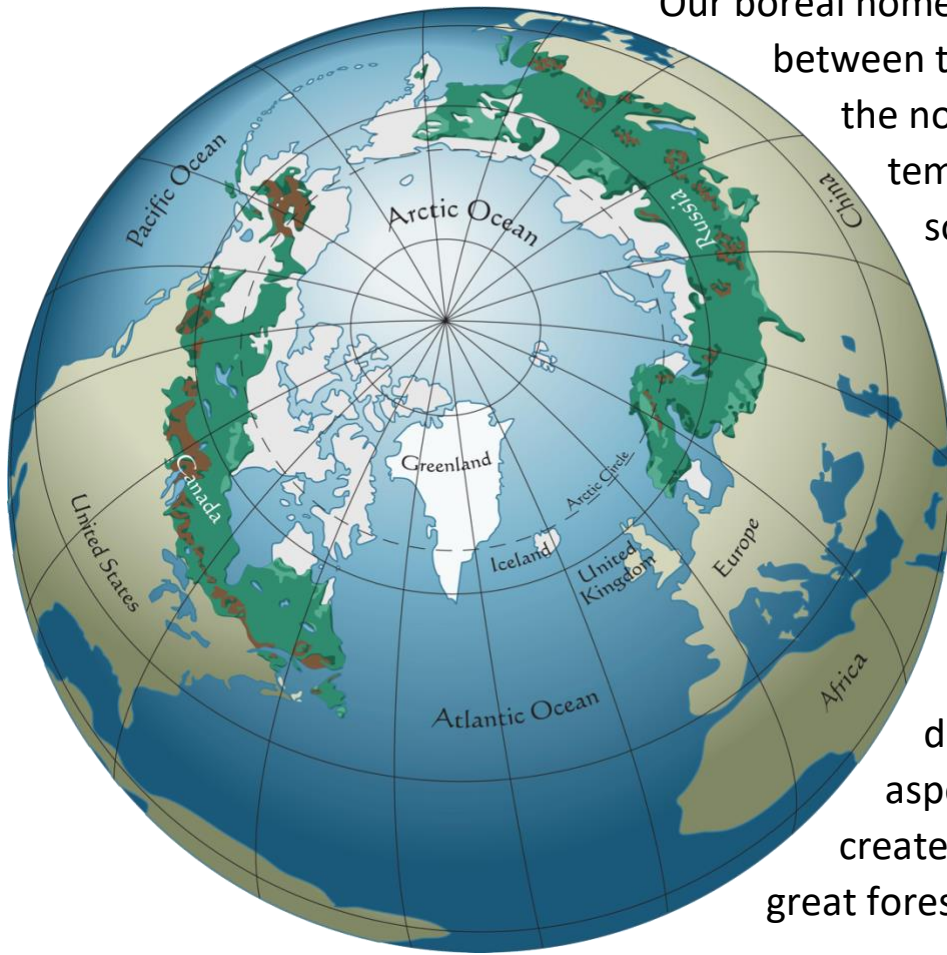
In this Diocese of Hearst-Moosonee, we live in the boreal region of northern Ontario. This is our homeland. This is where we pray and work, play and rest. This is where we raise our families. Named after



Boreas, the Greek god of the north wind, it is a land of vast boreal forests and wetlands, abundant lakes, rivers, and streams abounding in fresh water.

Wildlife and fish flourish. Each spring we welcome the return of the Canada geese and countless other birds that nest and raise their young in our lands. Our winters

are cold and brilliant with sun. Our night skies dance with the *aurora borealis*. The boreal region sustains us and gives us life. It defines our imagination. It is where God is at home. It is where God continues to reveal himself and his plan of salvation to us.



Our boreal homeland is tucked between the arctic tundra to the north and the temperate forests to the south. Circling the northern globe, the circumpolar boreal region drapes the earth in a halo of green and blue. The coniferous pine, spruce, larch, and fir mix with the deciduous birch, aspen, and poplar to create one of the earth's great forest biomes.

Home to a third of the globe's boreal forest, the Canadian boreal region stretches from the Atlantic coasts of Newfoundland and Labrador, across northern Canada to the Northwest and Yukon Territories. In the north of our homeland lies the Hudson Bay Lowlands, the world's second largest peatland complex. The rest of the world's boreal forest stretches across the vast sweep of Russia, Alaska and Scandinavia.

Recently, the universal Church focused its attention on another great forest region



of the world, the tropical forests of the Amazon Basin of South America. In response to the 2019 Synod on the Amazon, Pope Francis shared his reflections in the post-synodal address entitled *Querida Amazonia* (“Beloved Amazonia”). His opening statement offered a fresh vision of our natural world: “The beloved Amazon region stands before the world in all its splendour, its drama, and its mystery. God granted us the grace of focusing on that region ...” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia* [February 2, 2020], # 1).

In *Querida Amazonia*, the Holy

Father sketched out four

dreams for the

Amazon Region: a

social dream, a

cultural dream,

an ecological

dream, and an

ecclesial dream. A

social dream that

longs to promote the

dignity of the poor, the

Indigenous peoples, the least of

those whose voices are never heard; a cultural dream that respects and

empowers a rich cultural diversity; an ecological dream that nourishes

and protects life and natural beauty; and an ecclesial dream that seeks

to incarnate an Amazonian vision of holiness within the universal

Church.



This four-tiered dream recognizes the complexity of what the Pope calls an “integral ecology” (Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015), chapter 4, # 137-162) that recognizes that everything is interrelated and interconnected (*Laudato Si’*, # 138). Pope Francis stressed that “we



are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental” (*Laudato Si’*, # 139). In other words, integral ecology seeks a three-fold reconciliation; reconciliation with God, reconciliation with others, and reconciliation with all creation.

As the members of the Church of boreal Northern Ontario, I invite you to join with me so we can focus our attention on our boreal homeland. Together let us seek what God is revealing to us in and through the breath and beauty of our lands and waters.

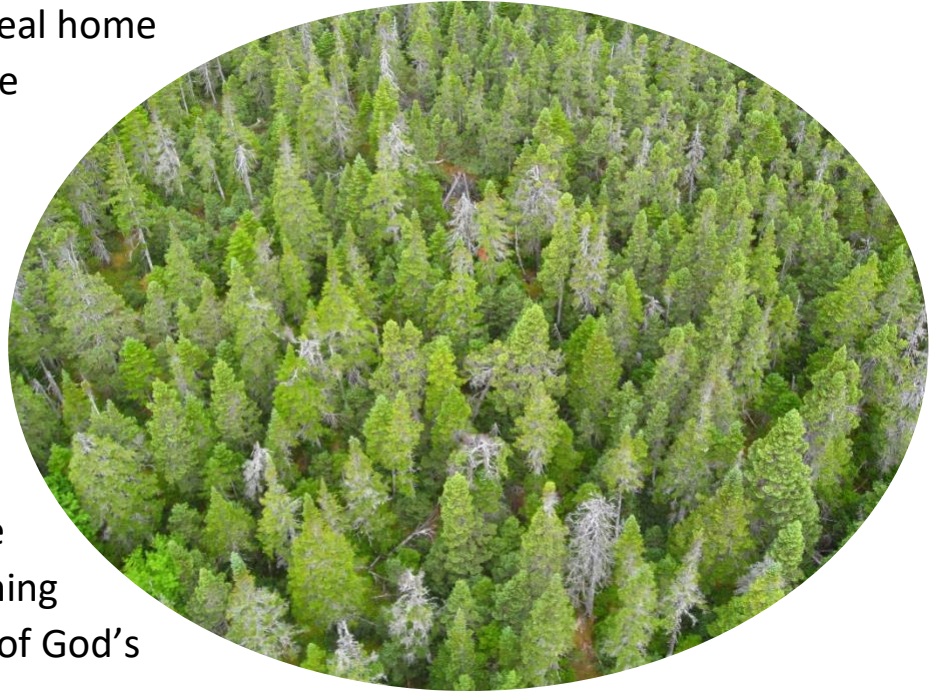
Let us, dear brothers and sisters, imagine what might happen if we viewed our boreal homeland with the same comprehensive, integral dream offered by the universal Church in Pope Francis’s vision of the Amazon! Imagine if we referred to the boreal region as the “beloved boreal,” to the Hudson Bay lowlands as the “beloved Hudson Bay lowlands.” What dreams, what possibilities would emerge if we used different words to speak about this region in which we live?

Could we go so far as to imagine the boreal region as our common home, given to us in the boundless and fecund love of God? Could we then imagine our boreal home

as our place where we experience Christ's blessing of salvation, as a place of splendour, drama, and mystery, a place where God calls us to be saved?

Could we imagine the boreal region as opening us up to the mystery of God's creative grace? Could we ever

imagine our boreal homeland not as "a problem to be solved, [but as] a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and with praise"? (*Laudato Si'*, # 12)



What do we dream for our boreal homeland? Indigenous communities have the custom when making decisions, to ask what our decisions today will mean for the seventh generation following us. What do we wish to pass on to the seventh generation? What does "integral ecology" look like in the boreal region of northern Ontario?

What is God, the Creator who dwells as the Holy Trinity, revealing to us in this great land of ours? What does the Creator wish to share with us?

How are we being called to care for this common home in northern Ontario?

How we envision our homeland will determine what we value. Our values determine the breadth of our visions, the questions we are capable of posing. In one perspective, we hear of a land that is sparsely-peopled and composed only of bush and swamp. In other contexts, we hear of a region rich in natural resources - a vast wilderness land flush with untapped economic and mineral potential.



We hear of a carbon-rich ecosystem that must be protected for the sake of climate change and planetary life. We hear of a wilderness without roads, an ecologically functional boreal wilderness that needs to be preserved and protected. We hear of a homeland, of Indigenous peoples, of settlers, of a diverse people whose roots run deep in our land.

Different people have diverse perspectives regarding the “value” of our boreal homeland. Given our diverse visions and dreams for the boreal region, not all perspectives are in harmony with each other. In other words, the boreal landscape is a “contested landscape” (The Canadian

Senate, in their boreal forest report of June 1999 recognized the “competing realities” of the Canadian boreal forest.)



Multiple visions vie for attention – visions of great mineral wealth and profit, visions of global climate change regulation, visions of healthy and vibrant human communities,

visions of protected areas and conservation, visions of a homeland for healthy wildlife, and many more. How to integrate these different visions into an integral ecology as offered by *Laudato Si'* – I suggest to you that that is our challenge.

Our Catholic heritage and tradition open us up to many possible dreams. Consider how we have come to imagine the self-revelation of



God. We contemplate the mystery of God as the Triune mystery. In our Nicene Creed we profess that we believe in God the Father, *maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible*; we believe in Jesus Christ, *through whom all things were made*, and we believe in the Holy Spirit, *the Lord, the giver of life*. For countless generations we have professed our belief in this God, who is the Creator. For our Christian tradition, this has meant the Trinitarian Creator.

What does it mean that God has chosen to be revealed as the Creator God? Why as the Trinitarian Creator? Our boreal homeland, the beautifully crafted gift of the creative love of God, is now before us, in all its sacred wonder. It is our homeland, yes, but even more profoundly, it is God's homeland for us, created in love and fruitfulness.

Our boreal homeland has a mission. Our boreal homeland can be a pathway to God. It can be a source of contemplation that leads us to prayer and worship; a sign, a path on our pilgrimage here on earth.



The boreal region is our promised homeland, our Garden of Eden, the place where we find salvation, the place that calls us to faith, hope and love. It is a constant source of life, strength and healing for our people, a daily source of joy and meaning.



Our boreal forests, our coastal tundra, our wetlands, our rivers, and our lakes have all become our “inscape” that is, “the unique essence or inner nature of a person, place, thing, or event, especially depicted in poetry or a work of art” (cf. *Oxford Dictionary* on line. The notion of “inscape” is particularly well-developed in the poetry of the Jesuit Romantic poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins [1844-1889]).

All landscapes, if lived in long enough, become “inscapes”. Spaces becomes places—places of meaning, places of salvation. They define our visions, what questions we pose, what dreams we contemplate. Maybe that’s why people who have an indigenous intimacy with lands and waters, skies, and seas, have come to a depth of wisdom.

The boreal land can no longer be simply “swamp and bush” but rather must become a home, a place where wisdom lies, a place that elicits dreams and hopes. Of particular concern is our care for Indigenous communities and their cultural traditions in the northern boreal region.



As Pope Francis noted “[Indigenous peoples] are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed” (Laudato Si’, n. 146). For Indigenous people, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space that defines their identity and values.

The Church of Christ was born in the spiritual fire of Pentecost. Followers of Christ, emboldened and animated by the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, spoke a language understood by all. Perhaps now is the time for us to experience our own New Pentecost in northern Ontario.

The Creator has given us these lands and waters of life. Let us begin to speak of the myriad ways in which the Creator God is present and active in our great northern land, the land of the *aurora borealis*, the land of the boreal forest and the Hudson Bay lowlands. The lands and waters are speaking to us. The lands and waters hold a secret as the

place in which we are called to work out our salvation. Do we have the eyes to see, and the ears to hear the Word of God active in our land?

I invite the faithful of our northern Church, and indeed all men and women of good will, to begin a dialogue, a conversation that dreams of an integral ecology for northern Ontario. The future will bring us significant challenges. Let us dialogue with each other. Let us seek paths of unity and hope that will enliven our families, our communities, our lands, and our waters. Let us seek ways that will keep the land alive (For an indigenous witness to the life of the boreal lands and waters, see Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue, *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive* [Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press: 2019]).

May God, whose Word is continually active in all his creation, grant us the freedom and grace to live joyfully a resurrected world, and to ever seek “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21.1).



✠Terrence Prendergast, S.J.
Apostolic Administrator
Pentecost (June 5, 2022)

Credits

A globe of the world featuring the boreal forest: aroderick/Alamy Stock Vector
Other photos: Trevor Scott, S.J. and John McCarthy, S.J.