



Catholic Social Thought and the Environment

Contemporary environmental consciousness in the Church received a strong kickstart with St. Pope John Paul's 1990 World Day of Peace message *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation* and in a number of statements from conferences of bishops in recent years.¹ While there had been some environmental activism from the Catholic Rural Life Conference and other grassroots Catholic groups and church leaders at the local, national, and international levels prior to 1990, it intensified in the years following.

A strong component of that consciousness focused on stewardship of the environment, drawing inspiration from scripture. John Paul argued that through the Genesis work mandate "to subdue the earth," humans image their Creator and share God's creative action, a font of deep spirituality.² With the Lord, we become co-creators of the earth and the ways humans have developed society over time, what we might call "creation given" and "creation enhanced."³

In his 2008 World Day of Peace message *The Human Family, A Community of Peace*, Pope Benedict XVI introduced the concept of a "covenant between human beings and the environment" [7]⁴. In his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, the Holy Father developed a threefold responsibility tied to the environment: "a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations, and towards humanity as a whole" [48]. Pope Benedict, in framing the environmental concerns in terms of covenant, took a giant step from just the "stewardship model"—which positions humans over-against the rest of creation—to a more adequate approach that takes seriously the solidarity that extends beyond the human species to other forms of life and their habitats.⁵

The pope decried hoarding of energy and stockpiling that gives rise to exploitation and frequent conflicts between and within nations. He urged solidarity between developing countries and those highly industrialized, lowering energy consumption, increased research into alternative forms of energy, and redistribution [49]. He emphasized responsible stewardship, duties to future generations, international joint action, changing lifestyles, transparency and accountability for using up shared resources, and strengthening the "covenant between human beings and the environment" [50-51]. He also underscored how many of the world's resources are "squandered by wars!"

In *Laudato Si'*, the first encyclical focused primarily on the environment,⁶ Pope Francis ties environmental

concern closely to concern for the poor. He presents the scientific consensus on climate change and other environmental threats and discusses how environmental degradation affects human life and society. For Francis, the poor usually pay the highest price for environmental destruction, whether it is desolation of natural habitats, erosion of farmlands, coastal flooding, or the location of polluting factories. Working from the biblical account of creation, Francis teaches that the universe reveals the divine and that, woven together in God's love for all creatures, we human persons are united as sisters and brothers on a wonderful pilgrimage.

The pope argues that we are consuming the planet's limited resources, enthralled with a technocratic paradigm that promises unlimited growth and is based on a belief in an infinite supply of the earth's goods. As such, we have no interest in more balanced levels of production, better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment, or the rights of future generations. Maximizing profits drives these patterns. What we need is an integral ecology that, understanding that the social and environmental crises are one, demands an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and protecting nature.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See, for example, U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (November 14, 1991) and *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, the Common Good* (June 15, 2001); The Dominican Episcopal Conference, *Pastoral Letter on the Relationship of Human Beings to Nature* (January 21, 1987); The Catholic Bishops of the Philippines, *What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* (January 29, 1988); Indiana Catholic Conference, *Care for the Earth* (February, 2000); Catholic Bishops of the Boston Province, *And God Saw That It Was Good* (October 4, 2000); and Twelve U.S. and Canadian Bishops, *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* (February 22, 2001).
- 2 Saint Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, nos. 3, 24-27.
- 3 Ibid., no. 4.
- 4 Numbers in brackets refer to paragraph numbers in the document referenced.
- 5 Thomas Massaro, S.J., "The Future of Catholic Social Teaching," in *Blueprint for Social Justice*, Volume LIV, No. 5, January 2001, pp. 1-7, at 6.
- 6 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, May 24, 2015.