

Official Catholic Teaching on the Environment Still in its Infancy

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In the past two decades both the late Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have addressed the ecological issue on a number of occasions. The most notable documents are: *Peace with God the Creator: Peace with All Creation* (January 1st 1990), Chapter 10 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), *Caritas in Veritate* (July 2009), *If you want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (January 1st 2010) and *The Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps*, (January 11th , 2010). But it is not all words: The Vatican has installed photovoltaic panels on the roof of the Pope Paul VI auditorium. In addition, it is funding tree-planting in Hungary as a way of offsetting its carbon omissions. The Vatican has also been quite insistent that the affluent lifestyle of the Minority World is having an enormous negative impact on the planet.

In *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation*, the late Pope John Paul II wrote: “Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which this causesSimplicity, moderation and discipline as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless hubris of a few.” Pope Benedict, in a document published on January 1st 2010, entitled, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, repeats the same message. In No. 11 he writes, “It is becoming more and more evident that the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine

our life-styles and the prevailing models of consumption and production, which are often unsustainable from a social, environmental and even economic point of view. We can no longer do without a real change of outlook which will result in new life-styles, “in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investment.”

However, despite the above writings and initiatives, I will argue in this paper that official Catholic Teaching on ecology is still only in its infancy. The well known theologian and philosopher Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J., is reputed to have said that the Catholic Church arrived at insights into social justice, a little breathless and a little late. This is much more accurate when it comes to appraising its teaching on ecology.

Papal teaching fails to capture the true magnitude of the ecological crisis

Firstly, none of the above documents gives any overall sense of the magnitude of the current ecological crisis facing the planet, humankind and every other creature living on the planet. The only document that has any sense of the overwhelming nature of the problem was an address by Pope John Paul II on January 17th 2001, in which he called for an “ecological conversion” for everyone. In that address he used the word catastrophe, and he stated that humanity needed to stop before the abyss. Though the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, contains large swathes of quotations from the late Pope John Paul II, this one is absent. I have not seen a reference to it in any official documents since.

It seems to me that, if an individual or institution does not have an accurate appraisal of the true magnitude of the ecological challenges facing the earth, one

cannot claim that that individual or institution understands the current ecological crisis. Furthermore, unless one understands the magnitude of a problem, one cannot design an appropriate response. So, despite an increased sprinkling of ecological language and concerns in addresses and documents from the Holy See, these still lack an accurate analysis of the problem. One can make all kinds of excuses, for example, that the immediate problems facing the human community are so immediate and pressing that there is little energy left to look beyond this to what is happening to the wider earth community, even though such oversights will have dire consequences for every creature, including humankind.

Papal teaching deficient on climate change and the destruction of biodiversity

Take the two most serious ecological issues facing the planet – climate change and the destruction of global biodiversity, or, in theological language, the irreversible destruction of God’s creation. Both of these concerns merit only one paragraph each in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Given the enormous pain, death and destruction caused by these human-created global phenomena and the devastation they will continue to wreak on the planet, every living creature and humankind, into the future, a single paragraph from the leadership of the Catholic Church is, in my opinion not very competent.

Papal teaching misses the urgency of dealing with Ecological Crisis

The second element which must inform any ecological analysis is clarity about the urgency of tackling the issue. Is it something that must be addressed on a massive scale immediately, or is it something that can be postponed until other issues, such as poverty or unemployment are first confronted and solved? Once again, in reading the above documentation, one gets no sense that the authors are aware of

the urgency of the particular issue. On climate change, for example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has made it clear that, unless greenhouse emissions begin to drop by 2016, there will be no realistic chance of keeping the average rise in global temperature below 2 degree Celsius. In the past two years, the scientific consensus has moved towards the conclusion that we will need to reduce carbon emissions to 350 parts per million if we want to achieve that goal. Scientists are also saying that, if the average global temperatures rise by more than 2 degrees of Celsius, huge areas of the planet will be uninhabitable for humans and many other creatures, possibly within one hundred years. This is why the failure to reach a fair, ambitious and binding treaty at Copenhagen in December 2009 was such a tragedy and even though there are negotiations under the aegis of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change scheduled for April and May of 2010, the issue has gone off the boil.

On December 6th 2009, after praying the Angelus, Pope Benedict XVI wished success to the world leaders who would gather in Copenhagen to seek an agreement on how to tackle climate change in a fair and just way. In his brief remarks, the Pope recalled that the way to protect the earth was to include respect for God's laws and the moral dimension of human life. He went on to say: "I hope that the work will help identify actions respectful and favourable to solidarity development founded on the dignity of the human person and oriented towards the common good" (www.zenit.org December 6, 2009). He spoke about protecting the interests of the poor and future generations. It is regrettable that he did not include the public details of the Holy See's position at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference.

At all the previous UN Climate Conferences, the Holy See was represented by the local nuncio who could not be expected to have a detailed knowledge of the various strands of the negotiations. In Copenhagen, the delegation of the Holy See was headed by Archbishop Celistino Migliore, the Permanent Observer for the Holy See at the United Nations in New York. He has written and spoken regularly about climate change within the UN. The delegation included a climate expert Marcus Wandinger and Paolo Conversi, an official from the Vatican Secretariat of State, who also teaches human ecology at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. The Vatican delegation lent its support to a robust treaty which involved sufficient curbs on greenhouse gas emissions to keep the average global temperature below 2 degrees Celsius. The target set for rich, industrialized countries was a 40% reduction in greenhouse gases before 2020. It also championed a scaling up of the Adaptation Fund to at least, \$195 billion per annum. This fund would be made available to economically poor countries in order to help them adapt to the climate change consequences which are already affecting the planet. I believe that it would have been very effective, in terms of moral pressure, if Pope Benedict XVI had included these figures and the rationale behind them in the Angelus address of January 6th or in *Caritas in Veritate* for that matter. As it is, very few people know what the Vatican's position is on reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Though Ecology is a science based on data, there is a scarceness of data in Papal Teaching on Ecology

Thirdly, ecology is a science which is based on empirical data about what is happening in particular ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole. Despite this data-focused nature of ecology, none of the above documents based their ecological

reflections on scientific data. The drafters of these documents have available to them competent scientific data from reputable bodies such as the IPCC or, in the area of the destruction of Biodiversity, from the UN Convention on Biodiversity. There was no reference to these bodies or to any other scientific authorities in the documents.

The Vatican has no problem quoting UN documents on economic, social, political and historical data in dealing with almost every other aspect of Catholic Social Teaching. They have no difficulty referring to research conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (No.62, *Caritas in Veritate*). Why is there one *modus operandi* when dealing with economics and a different one when it comes to looking at ecological issues? Other religious organisations such as the World Council of Churches include scientific data in their reflections on issues such as climate change. Similarly, Bishops' Conferences in Germany, Ireland, the Philippines, the United States and Australia have written pastoral letters on ecological issues. The majority of these documents base their moral and religious reflections on ecological issues on a number of sources. These include empirical data on a topic in question, the new perspective we have gleaned in recent decades on the Universe and the Earth and the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. At least in *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, Pope Benedict does list some of the current global ecological challenges. He writes, "Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as, climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?" (No. 4).

In a reflection entitled, “Benedict XVI Offers Middle Ground on Environment,” in www.zenit.org (January 10, 2010). Archbishop Giampaolo Crepaldi, the former Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace gave what I consider an extraordinary explanation for this lack of scientific data in Papal documents on the environment. He claimed that, “in the countries of north-central Europe, and especially in Germany, Benedict XVI’s encyclical “*Caritas in Veritate*” was the object of severe criticism, precisely in regard to the question of the environment, and particularly in regard to climate change.” Archbishop Crepaldi continued; “So it was logical to look forward to the message of this year’s World Day of Peace dedicated to the theme “*If you Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation.*” “Benedict XVI did not miss the opportunity to restate his teaching and, thus probably upsetting once again all those who tend to weigh down ideological themes with excessive ideological burdens. The central point of the message is, in my opinion, a passage from paragraph 13, where the Pope says that ‘a correct understanding of the relationship between man and the environment’ will not end by absolutising nature or by considering it more important than the human person.” Speaking about the papal document Crepaldi continues “the Church expresses misgivings ‘about notions of the environment inspired by eco-centrism and biocentrism’ because it eliminates the difference between man and other living things, favouring an ‘egalitarian vision of the dignity of all living creatures’”. “This thus gives rise to a new pantheism with neo-pagan accents which ‘would see the source of man’s salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms.’”

These same sentiments were already expressed in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Number 463 states that “a correct understanding of the environment prevents the utilitarian reduction of nature to a mere object to be

manipulated and exploited. At the same time, it must not absolutize nature and place it above the dignity of the human person himself. In this latter case, one can go so far as to divinize nature or the earth, as can readily be seen in certain ecological movements that seek to gain an international guaranteed institutional status for their beliefs.” In the second paragraph of No. 463, it goes on to state that, “the Magisterium finds the motivation for its opposition to a concept of the environment based on eco-centrism and on biocentrism in the fact that, ‘it is being proposed that the ontological and axiological difference between men and other living beings is eliminated, since the biosphere is considered a biotic unity of undifferentiated value. Thus man’s superior responsibility can be eliminated in favour of an egalitarian consideration of the ‘dignity’ of all living beings.’”¹

The problem with the above texts is that they are based on an inadequate understanding of modern science. In his book, *The Singing Heart of the World: Creation, Evolution and Faith*, the Irish scientist Dr. John Feehan writes about the unity at the heart of the universe and, in a special way the unity that marks the living world. He writes that “the animal, mammal or bird or insect or worm, is from its unique perspective the subject, each at the centre of a world, and all their worlds overlap and influence each other and this is what, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, is the ‘science of the architecture of creation.’ “The differences that distinguish one species from another exist to the extent that each species is uniquely adapted to exploit the resources of one particular niche, which is different from another creature.”²

¹ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 2004, Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines.

² John Feehan, 2010, *The Singing Heart of the Universe, Creation, Evolution and Faith*, Columba Publications, Dublin, page 86.

Earlier on in the book, he points out that “if you speak the language of belief in God and embrace what the revelation of science tells you, then no species is insignificant. Each is worthy in the eyes of God, deserving of our respect and study and admiration. Even and, perhaps especially, the most obscure.”³ He quotes Saint Augustine “for heaven God has created the angels, for the earth creatures that crawl, and neither is superior to the other; because the hand of man can no more create a worm than an angel.”⁴

One might ask, does the approach of people such as Fr. Thomas Berry or Dr. Feehan denigrate the human as the Vatican documents seem to fear? Not at all! Feehan critiques the hubris of believing that we are the only beings on earth that have intrinsic value, but also celebrates what is truly unique about the human mode of being and the responsibilities which accrue to knowing our proper place in the scheme of things. He writes, “We are, of course, very conscious that we humans are unique. We are so aware of it that for a long time we thought of ourselves as altogether superior because of this special human talent, in the process losing sight of our place in creation, so firmly were our eyes fixed on a destiny that would see us enjoying eternity with God, in whose image we conceived ourselves to be made – unmindful of the fact that so is every other creature on the earth.” He goes on to write that “we can now ask the question of what is special about the human mode of being in a more essential way: what is this special human talent, and how are we meant to use it, knowing our place in creation as we now do, and having a better grasp of family history?”

³ Ibid page 76.

⁴ Ibid 76. “Creavit in coelo Angelos, in terra vermiculos, non superior in illis, non inferior in istis, Sicut enim nulla manus Angelum, it nulla posset creare vermiculum. “ Augustin, Liber soliloquiorum animae ad deum.

We are no less a part of the family than before, but we have been promoted to a new post of responsibility in the family, so to speak. If our living, in common with all that lives but in a way distinct to us, can in some sense be thought of as sharing in an incomprehensible well-spring of life that out of infinity infuses the cosmos (we might call it Divine Life), we can through this new human mode of apprehension be said in some sense to share in the Divine Mind.”⁵ The perspective in *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, does not share this approach. It is exclusively human-centred. In No 7 the Pope writes, The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council reminds us that, “God has destined the earth and everything it contains for all peoples and nations. The goods of creation belong to humanity as a whole. Yet the current pace of environmental exploitation is seriously endangering the supply of certain natural resources not only for the present generation, but above all for generations yet to come.” There is no mention of the children of the fish or the flowers or the fact that possibly one third of the species of the earth will have no children because of mass extinction caused by human behavior.

To be fair, the Pope is quite perceptive in analyzing the ecological crisis from a human perspective. In No 8 of *If you Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, he calls for intergenerational solidarity and a renewed sense of *intragenerational solidarity*, especially in relationships between developing countries and highly industrialized countries: The international community has an urgent duty to find institutional means of regulating the exploitation of non-renewable resources, involving poor countries in the process, in order to plan together for the future.” *The ecological crisis shows the urgency of a solidarity which embraces time and*

⁵ Ibid, page 110.

space. It is important to acknowledge that among the causes of the present ecological crisis is the historical responsibility of the industrialized countries.”

Most Catholic Creation theologians do not support the Deep-Ecology perspective of Arne Ness.

To return to the earlier discussion of the lack of scientific data in papal teaching on the environment and, especially the Vatican’s fear about a biocentric approach to the Earth, I will agree, of course, that some of the ideas that the Archbishop Crepaldi challenges are found in the Deep Ecology movement associated with the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. This movement insists that “all things in the biosphere have an equal right to live and blossom and reach their individual forms of unfolding and self-realisation with the larger Self-Realisation.⁶” I do not know of a single Catholic theologian who accepts this position. Many competent theologians such as Fr. Denis Edwards from Adelaide, Dr. Charles Rue, Dr. Celia Dean-Drummond or Dr. Mary Grey from Britain, Elizabeth Johnson, Mary Ellen Tucker, Thomas Berry, Leonardo Boff from Brazil or John Feehan , rightly situate humankind within an emergent cosmology and a living, evolving world. But even before modern scientific discoveries gave us an insight into the extraordinary age of the universe and its evolutionary emergence, Francis of Assisi was telling us that all nature are kin, in other words part of our family. He expressed this most beautifully in the *Canticle of the Creatures*. All creatures are understood as kin. St. Francis was not a pantheist and he is the Patron of Ecology.

In an otherwise positive review of *Caritas in Veritate*, the Irish theologian Fr. Donal Dorr writes that “the whole encyclical is written from within an older

⁶ Bill Davis and George Session, *Deep Ecology and Living as if Nature Mattered*, Salt Lake City, Gibbs-Smith, 1985, page 64.

anthropocentric paradigm, the ecological issues are treated almost entirely in terms of present-day human concerns. What is needed today, however, is a kind of Copernican revolution leading to a major paradigm shift. We need to locate all our human concerns – and especially our approach to economics – within the far wider context of an ecological and cosmic vision. Nothing would be lost and much would be gained if what the pope had written in this encyclical about economics and business were framed within this wider vision.”⁷

In critiquing the position of Archbishop Crepaldi I am aware that the translation from the Italian of what the archbishop said is crude and may have distorted his meaning somewhat, but I cannot see what all this fear of an eco-centric approach to the biosphere and possible pantheism has to do with the fact that Pope Benedict XVI did not deal in any substantive way with climate change, in an encyclical issued five months before one of the most important conference of the 21st century. I do not understand how a scientific analysis of the causes of climate change, or the horrendous consequences which it holds for the future of all life, and the steps that need to be taken to avoid this catastrophe, could lead to pantheism.

An exclusively homocentric view of creation was understandable for people such as Archbishop Usher of Armagh who, using the Hebrew Scriptures and other ancient documents, calculated around the year 1630 that the earth was about 6,000 year old, and that all the creatures which are now on earth were there from the beginning. Within this kind of cosmology it is easy to see how someone even as perceptive as Aristotle would place man at the pinnacle of the world and claim that everything else on the planet was there to serve man. In the book *Politics*, Aristotle

⁷ Dr. Donal Dorr, *Theology, the Economy and Ecology*, edited by James Noyes and Adrian Pabst, forthcoming this year (2010), SCM Press, London

writes that “nature makes nothing without some end in view, nothing to no purpose, it must be that nature has made (animals and plants) for the sake of man.”⁸

Before leaving the question of basing ecological teaching on independent and credible science, it is worth calling attention to Pope Benedict’s comments on evolution in *If You Want To Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, No 2. He writes, “I also observed that whenever nature, and human beings in particular, are seen merely as products of chance or evolutionary determinism, our overall sense of responsibility wanes.” It is not clear to me whether the Pope is challenging the Darwinian understanding of evolution through natural selection? If he is, I presume he is aware that he is overturning the theoretical basis for all modern biology and also repudiating the teaching of the late Pope John Paul II. I think it is important that we get clarity on this vital issue, as quickly as possible. We do not need another Galileo debacle!

What is meant by ‘Human Ecology’? How valid is the concept within a scientific perspective ?

Right through the recent papal teaching on ecology we find a very strange and confusing notion called “human ecology”. *Caritas in Veritate* (51) states “*when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits*”. The pope returns to this theme in *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (No 12) where he states that: “I readily encourage efforts to promote a greater sense of ecological responsibility which, as I indicated in my Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* would safeguard an authentic “human ecology” and thus forcefully

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, edition. Page 79

reaffirm the inviolability of human life at every stage and in every condition, the dignity of the person and the unique mission of the family, where one is trained in love of neighbour and respect for nature.” I have no problem with these sentiments, but does one have to repudiate the scientific categories of the Linnaean taxonomy to make this point?

The Linnaean system, which is still used in biology, begins with the widest category called **Biota** (all life). The next step up is known as **Domain**. In that category we are *Eukarya* since we are composed of eukaryotic cells. In terms of **Kingdom** we come under **Animalia** or animals. We fit into the **Phylum** of Chordata. On the next step up we come under the **Class** of **mammalia** or mammals. We are of the **Order** of primates, of the **Family** of **Hominidae**, or hominids, and the **Genus Homo** or humans. Finally, in terms of **Species** we are **Homo sapiens**. Humans are at the end point of this evolutionary process which emerged over 3.8 billion years ago. Yet, every facet of the above, plus other aspects of ecology, such as the relationship between the biosphere, hydrosphere, lithosphere and atmosphere are subsumed by the term “human ecology” even though modern humans are probably less than 200,000 years old.

This notion of “human ecology” seems totally at odds with what we know from the various sciences which is that the earth is almost 5 billion years old and that life on earth is about 3.8 billion years old. There were fully functioning ecosystems in the Lower Carboniferous period from 354 to 324 billion years ago. At that time there were no flowering plants or birds, but there were giant horsetails and ferns and an array of creatures, most of which are now extinct. In religious terms I am sure that God would have spoken the Genesis words, “it is good” over this and other phases of the evolution of life on earth. God would not be waiting for *home sapiens* to

arrive over one million years ago to give meaning to the broad sweep of creation. It is important theologically to remember that God has a history with nature which is independent of His/Her relationship with humanity.

The Holy See can learn much from the Statements of Local Churches which have made serious efforts to address ecological problems

In developing its teaching on the Earth the Holy See would do well to incorporate many of the insights from Bishops' Conferences around the world, going back to the first pastoral letter on the environment entitled, *What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?* which was written by the Philippines Bishops as far back as 1988. In fact it was the first Episcopal Pastoral Letter devoted exclusively to ecology. The Australian Bishops' 2002 *Social Justice Statement: A New Earth, The Environmental Challenge*, contains a lot of insightful material, as does the document on the Murray-Darling called *The Gift of Water: A Statement from Catholic Earthcare Australia endorsed by Bishops of the Murray-Darling Basin?*

In 2007, the Committee on Domestic and International Policy from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops produced, *Faithful Stewards of God's Creation: A Catholic Resource for Environmental Justice and Climate Change*. In 2009, the Irish Bishops' Conference wrote a *Pastoral Reflection on Climate Change*. In dealing with issues such as "solidarity" that document avoids the homocentric language of Vatican documents. On page 21, it reads "As Christians we cannot consider ourselves or our obligations in isolation from others or from the endangered earth and its creatures. Further on in that paragraph they state, "This responsibility extends to the whole creation and to all the finely balanced life-systems of our world, which may be threatened by even marginal changes in the earth's climate." Rome should realise that it has much to learn from the

teaching on ecology of Local Churches. The development of Catholic teaching on many questions, including ecology is not a one-way street.

There is an urgent need for a Synod on Creation

One of the most effective ways for the Catholic Church to give leadership in the area of protecting the planet would be for Pope Benedict XVI to call a Synod for Creation. Each local Church could begin to reflect on creation in its own area and see how Christians could give leadership in moving towards a more sane and sustainable world. In preparing for such a Synod, everyone in the Church, young, old, farmers, industrial workers, bankers, scientists, fishermen, theologians, contemplatives, religious, teachers, doctors, liturgists, artists, poets and writers would be able to share their insights and wisdom. This would give a great impetus to the tasks of caring for the earth that cares for every creature. I believe it would also give new life and focus to the Catholic faith in our contemporary society.

Writing in *The New York Times* William Yardley reports that pastors in the North West of the US claim, that environmentalism offered an entry point, especially to younger adults, who might otherwise view Christianity in a negative way because of its teaching on gay rights and abortion.⁹ He makes the point that amassing possessions and giving priority to money have been recognized as vices, by most religious traditions. They are associated with greed, selfishness and corruption. However, despite the expertise that religions have in dealing with this negative dimension of humankind, the Churches have not led the way in promoting alternative lifestyles and more sustainable ways of living. This surely, is one of the great tasks for all religions in the 21st Century.

⁹ William Yardley, "Pastors in Northwest Find Focus in 'Green,'" *New York Times*, January 16, 2010.