

## **Ecology and Faith in Jesus Christ**

### **Recent Catholic Teaching**

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It was always true that the good news of Jesus Christ involves the whole creation. But there is a new urgency to show the relationship between Christian faith and ecological commitment. The church is in mission today in a world threatened by global climate change, loss of biodiversity, deforestation, degraded land, damaged rivers and depleted fisheries. Already in 1971, Paul VI had recognized the environmental problem as an urgent wide-ranging social problem that concerns the whole human family, and had called Christians to take up responsibility with others for our shared future (*Octogesima Adveniens*, 21).

But the more recent contribution of John Paul II and Benedict XVI are far more detailed. This survey begins with John Paul II's 1990 Message for the World Day of Peace, and then considers his social encyclicals, and his advocacy of ecological conversion. Then it turns to Pope Benedict, focusing on his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and on his 2010 *Message for the World Day of Peace*. It concludes by gathering some thoughts from John Paul II on the way central mysteries of faith might be proclaimed in ecological terms.

#### **John Paul II's Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace**

The foundational document in Catholic teaching on ecological issues is Pope John Paul II's text for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, entitled *Peace with God the Creator; Peace with All of Creation*. Now more than twenty years old, this short text was released on December 8, 1989. In it, the pope recognizes that world peace is threatened by a lack of proper respect for nature and by the plundering of natural resources. At the same time he celebrates the emergence of a new global movement of people concerned about the future of our planet: "Moreover, a new *ecological awareness* is beginning to emerge which, rather than being downplayed, ought to be encouraged to develop into concrete programmes and initiatives" (John Paul II 1990, 3).<sup>1</sup> The encouragement of the emergence of this new global, ecological awareness is a constant in John Paul II's teaching, which he describes elsewhere as ecological conversion.

In this text his focus is on the ecological crisis as a moral issue, shifting ethical thinking beyond the inter-human to include the natural world:

Certain elements of today's ecological crisis reveal its moral character. First among these is the indiscriminate application of advances in science and technology. Many recent discoveries have brought undeniable benefits to humanity. Indeed they demonstrate the nobility of the human vocation to participate *responsibly* in God's creative action in the world. Unfortunately it is now clear that the application of these discoveries in the fields of industry and agriculture have produced harmful long-term effects. This has led to the painful realization that *we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.* (John Paul II 1990, 6)

The pope goes on to speak of the depletion of the ozone layer and the "greenhouse effect," pointing to the harm done to the atmosphere through industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, and "the resulting meteorological and atmospheric changes" that range from "damage to health to possible future submersion of low-lying lands." He points to two moral aspects of the ecological crisis. There is lack of respect for life, a reductionist vision of the human that involves contempt for the human person. And there is the destruction of animal and plant life and the reckless exploitation of natural resources. This leads the pope to formulate (1990, 7) a two-fold fundamental principle for a peaceful society: "*No peaceful society can afford to neglect either respect for life or the fact that there is an integrity to creation.*" He develops the idea of the integrity of creation along with that of common heritage:

Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a 'cosmos' endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. *This order must be respected.* The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity.

*On the other hand, the earth is ultimately a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all...* Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the

extent to which greed and selfishness-both individual and collective – are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual independence. (1990, 8)

The concepts of the integrity of creation and common heritage lead John Paul to call for international and national agreements on caring for the good of the planetary community. Essential to this is addressing the large issues of structural poverty, and the ecological and human damage caused by war. At a more personal level, he teaches (1990, 13), it means a change in life-style: “Simplicity, moderation, and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become part of everyday life.” Education in ecological responsibility is urgent: “a true education in responsibility entails a genuine conversion in ways of thought and behavior.” Churches and the whole of society have a role to play, but the first educator is the family “where the child learns to respect his [or her] neighbour and to love nature.” An important aspect of this education is aesthetic and contemplative education into the beauty of creation (1990, 14).

Again, the pope insists (1990, 15) on the order in creation that needs to be respected by everyone, on our inter-generational responsibilities to our children and grandchildren, and states that “*the ecological crisis is a moral issue*”. He then turns to the Catholic Church community reminding them of their serious obligation to care for the whole creation, based on the theology of creation and of redemption in Christ. In the last paragraph of this text (1990, 16) John Paul II explicitly extends respect for life to non-human creation: “Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join [the human] in praising God (cf. Ps 148:96).”

### **The Social Encyclicals**

In his social encyclicals, John Paul II begins to integrate ecology into the tradition of Catholic social teaching. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987, 34) he offers three considerations that ground respect for the order and interconnectedness of the whole creation:

The first consideration is the appropriateness of acquiring a growing awareness of the fact that one cannot use with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate - animals, plants, the natural elements - simply as one wishes, according to one's own economic needs. On the contrary, one must take into account the nature of

each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the cosmos.

The second consideration is based on the realization - which is perhaps more urgent - that natural resources are limited; some are not, as it is said, renewable. Using them as if they were inexhaustible, with absolute dominion, seriously endangers their availability not only for the present generation but above all for generations to come.

The third consideration refers directly to the consequences of a certain type of development on the quality of life in the industrialized zones. We all know that the direct or indirect result of industrialization is, ever more frequently, the pollution of the environment, with serious consequences for the health of the population.

In the light of all this, the pope insists that in our engagement with the natural world, “we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity” (1988, 34). On May 1<sup>st</sup> 1991, John Paul issued *Centesimus Annus*, on the hundredth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*. In this text, the pope presents the ecological crisis as due to an error about the nature of the human in relation to the natural world:

At the root of the senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. [Humanity], who discovers [its] capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through [its] own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. [Humanity] thinks that [it] can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to [its] will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which [humanity] can indeed develop but must not betray. (1991, 37).

Again, the pope points to aesthetic attitude of wonder at the beauty of creation that enables us to see in creatures around us the message of God who creates them. He insists on humanity’s responsibility to preserve this beauty for future generations and goes on to present his own characteristic view of “human ecology”:

Although people are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to *safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic "human ecology"*...In this context, mention should be made of the serious problems of modern urbanization, of the need for urban planning which is concerned with how people are to live, and of the attention which should be given to a "social ecology" of work. (John Paul II 1991, 38)

The most fundamental structure for human ecology is the family, based on mutual self-giving of husband and wife. John Paul II makes it clear that he sees the family as at the heart of the culture of life, as a sanctuary of life. In his encyclical on life issues, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995, 42), John Paul II strongly affirms the unique dignity of the human person, and points to humanity's responsibility for the rest of creation:

As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15), [humanity] has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which [it] lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of [its] personal dignity, of [its] life, not only for the present but also for future generations. It is the ecological question-ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and of other forms of life to "human ecology" properly speaking - which finds in the Bible clear and strong ethical direction, leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life.

The dominion given to humanity is not an absolute power, but something to be exercised only as sharing in the divine Wisdom and divine love for creation. Again John Paul II teaches that in our interaction with the natural world, "we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity" (1995, 42).

### **John Paul II's Concepts of Ecological Conversion and Ecological Vocation**

John Paul II's encouragement of ecological conversion is stated most explicitly in his General Audience Address (2001, 3-4) where he writes:

Unfortunately, if we scan the regions of our planet, we immediately see that humanity has disappointed God's expectations. [Humanity], especially in our time, has without hesitation devastated wooded plains and valleys, polluted waters, disfigured the earth's habitat, made the air unbreathable, disturbed the hydrogeological and atmospheric systems, turned luxuriant areas into deserts and undertaken forms of unrestrained industrialization, degrading that "flowerbed" - to use an image from Dante Alighieri (*Paradiso*, XXII, 151) - which is the earth, our dwelling-place. We must therefore encourage and support the "ecological conversion" which in recent decades has made humanity more sensitive to the catastrophe to which it has been heading.

It is clear that the whole human race is called to this conversion, but the Christian community is committed to it for deeply theological reasons. This call to repentance and to a new ecological awareness and action is further developed in the "Joint Statement" (John Paul II and Bartholomew I, 2002), signed by the pope and the ecologically minded Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople on June 10, 2002:

In our own time we are witnessing a growth of an *ecological awareness* which needs to be encouraged, so that it will lead to practical programmes and initiatives. An awareness of the relationship between God and humankind brings a fuller sense of the importance of the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, which is God's creation and which God entrusted to us to guard with wisdom and love (cf. *Gen* 1:28)...What is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation. The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine *conversion* in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act...It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing powers. Within a single generation, we could steer the earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing.

In his “Angelus Address” given at Castel Gandolfo on 25th August of that year (2002, 1) **John Paul II** introduced the idea of an ecological *vocation*: “Human beings are appointed by God as stewards of the earth to cultivate and protect it. From this fact there comes what we might call their “ecological vocation”, which in our time has become more urgent than ever.” These themes of ecological conversion and ecological vocation have been important in the education of the Christian community to begin to see ecology as central to Christian witness in the world.

### **Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate***

Like his predecessor, Pope Benedict has spoken often about ecology in a variety of speeches and documents. He has also taken public action by, in 2008, installing an array of solar panels on the large Vatican audience hall and working to off-set the Vatican’s carbon emissions by involvement a reforestation project in Hungary. Some have gone so far as to describe Benedict a “the green pope” (Pepinster, 2010). I will focus on his comments in his 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and his 2010 *World Day of Peace Message*.

*Caritas in Veritate* takes up the theme of integral human development from Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio*, issued more than forty years earlier. A substantial section is devoted to ecology. The pope teaches that the natural world is God’s gift to everyone, and that it is the expression of divine love:

*Nature expresses a design of love and truth.* It is prior to us, and it has been given to us by God as the setting for our life. Nature speaks to us of the Creator (cf. Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be “recapitulated” in Christ at the end of time (cf. Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a “vocation.” (Benedict XVI 2009, 48)

Because it is an expression of divine love and truth, because it is God’s gift to us, because it speaks of the Creator and because it’s “vocation” is to share with human beings in their transformation in Christ, the natural world has its own integrity. Benedict rejects two positions: new forms of paganism and pantheism that elevate nature above the human and the opposite idea that humans have total dominion over nature as raw material for their manipulation. He sees the natural world as a wondrous work of the Creator which has its own “grammar” which humans are called respect, not recklessly exploit. He points out as well that in using resources such as

non-renewal sources of energy, we are called to solidarity, which involves ensuring access for poorer countries, and inter-generational justice

This responsibility is a global one, for it is concerned not just with energy but with the whole of creation, which must not be bequeathed to future generations depleted of its resources. Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population... At the same time we must recognize our grave duty to hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it. This means being committed to making joint decisions “after pondering responsibly the road to be taken, decisions aimed at strengthening that *covenant between human beings and the environment*, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.” (Benedict XVI 2009, 50)

Benedict reinforces the idea of a covenant bond of love with the rest of creation that mirrors the creative love of God for all God's creatures, which he had introduced in the 2008 World Day of Peace. He goes on to insist that the way we treat other creatures is deeply connected to the way we treat each other as human beings:

*The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.* This invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences.” What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new life-styles*. (2009, 51).

The shift in mentality and in life-styles echoes the ecological conversion advocated by John Paul II. Benedict goes on to spell out what this means for the Church. It is called not just to ecological education but also to advocacy on behalf of the natural world as well as for “human ecology”:

*The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect [humankind] from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when “human ecology” is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits.* (2009, 51).

Our responsibilities to the rest of creation cannot be separated from our responsibilities towards human beings: “The book of nature is one and indivisible.” For Benedict as for John Paul II, environmental ecology and human ecology belong together, interrelated in the prior gift of the Creator, the God who is “Truth and Love” (2009, 52).

### **2010 World Day of Peace Message**

Twenty years after John Paul II’s 1990 message, Benedict issued the 2010 World Day of Peace Message with the theme: *“If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation.”* He calls the human community to respect for creation as the beginning of all God’s works, and again speaks of the covenant between humans and the natural world that should mirror the creative love of God. He points to the beauty of creation, and the words of Dante: “Contemplating the beauty of creation inspires us to recognize the love of the Creator, that Love which ‘moves the sun and the other stars’” (2010, 2) He asks:

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? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of “environmental refugees”, people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it – and often their possessions as well – in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources? (Benedict XVI 2010, 4)

All of this is the context for Christian mission in today's world. These issues invite us to "rethink the path which we are travelling together." For Benedict, "dominion" (Gen 1:28) is not a permission for domination, but a call to be stewards of God, a summons to responsibility. This means that "when making use of natural resources, we should be concerned for their protection and consider the cost entailed – environmentally and socially – as an essential part of the overall expenses incurred." Benedict (2010, 5) encourages research and action on solar energy and the water cycle, "whose stability could be seriously jeopardized by climate change." Again, he calls for a new life-style: "It is becoming more and more evident that the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our life-style 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*." This involves far-reaching decisions on the part of individuals, families, communities and states and, of course the Church – and, of course, its mission:

*The Church has a responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save [humankind] from the danger of self-destruction. The degradation of nature is closely linked to the cultural models shaping human coexistence: consequently, "when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits... The book of nature is one and indivisible; it includes not only the environment but also individual, family and social ethics. (2010, 12)*

For Benedict, the natural world is where humans can experience beauty, peace, and reinvigoration. Again, he rejects absolutizing of nature over the human, expressing misgivings about "ecocentrism" and "biocentrism," and seeks to uphold the distinctiveness of the human. . In my view, his position is not so much anthropocentric, as theocentric. What he seeks to emphasize (2010, 14) is "the indivisible relationship between God, human beings and the whole of creation."

## Earthcare and Christian Life

As Benedict says, Christians view nature as grounded in the deepest mysteries of faith, creation and redemption in Christ: “They contemplate the cosmos and its marvels in light of the creative work of the Father and the redemptive work of Christ, who by his death and resurrection has reconciled with God ‘all things, whether on earth or in heaven’ (Col 1:20)” (2010, 14). Ecological commitment is fundamental to Christian life today because the natural world is intrinsic to the deepest mysteries of faith. What the doctrine of creation means, John Paul II tells us (1995, 15), is that the triune God is present as the mystery of love in the whole universe: “There is nothing created that is not filled with the ceaseless exchange of love that marks the innermost life of the Trinity, filled that is with the Holy Spirit: “the Spirit of the Lord has filled the world” (*Wis* 1:7).” In another text, he points out what the doctrine of the incarnation means for non-human creation:

The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in *this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is "flesh"*: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world. The Incarnation, then, also has a cosmic significance, a cosmic dimension. The "first-born of all creation," becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of [humanity], which is also "flesh" -- and in this reality with all "flesh", with the whole of creation. (1986, 50).

In the Word made flesh, God is united with all flesh, with the whole interconnected, biological world of fleshly reality, and with all the entities and processes that make up the matter of our universe. All this is to be recapitulated in Christ (Eph 1:10) and transformed in Christ to share in freedom and the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21). This is the truth we celebrate in the Eucharist, so that John Paul (2003, 8) says that every Eucharist has a cosmic character and is celebrated on the altar of the world:

This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is

celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated *on the altar of the world*. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. Truly this is the *mysterium fidei* which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ.

Christian life has an ecological character because it proclaims a God who gives God's self to us, first in creation and then in the Word made flesh, who, in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, promises to transform all things, all the creatures of Earth and of the universe, in Christ.

### Notes

1. I am following the official texts from the Vatican website. In a few places I have used a different English expression for the sake of inclusivity, and have shown this by placing it in square brackets. In all cases the italics are as in the original.

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