The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching

Its Origins and Contemporary Significance

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From Despot to Steward

The Greening of Catholic Social Teaching

BRIAN G. HENNING

> The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related "greenhouse effect" has now reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urban concentrations and vastly increased energy needs. Industrial waste, the burning of fossil fuels, unrestricted deforestation, the use of certain types of herbicides, coolants and propellants, all of these are known to harm the atmosphere and the environment. The resulting meteorological and atmospheric changes range from damage to health to the possible future submersion of low-lying lands.[1]

Global warming, species extinction, massive deforestation, increased desertification, overpopulation, the salinization of fresh water, toxic waste disposal—it is problems such as these that have led many to conclude with the author of this passage that we are in the midst of an environmental crisis. Yet there continue to be surprisingly large groups of individuals who are dubious of the severity or even the existence of these so-called environmental problems. Many privately suspect that this "environmental crisis" is merely

the fabrication of granola-eating, tree-hugging, sandal-wearing, ponytail-sporting, beatnik wannabes that care more about baby seals and redwoods than about fisherman and loggers. Besides, they often add, if any of these issues become problematic, we will surely be able to develop new technologies that will solve our problems. Environmental issues such as these, they conclude, are comparatively small matters of economics and technology, not morality and religion.

If you find yourself agreeing with this sort of assessment, you may be surprised to learn that the passage above was not written by an environmental activist. These words were part of a speech entitled "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," delivered on January 1, 1990, by Pope John Paul II. In this speech the pope unequivocally declared not only that there is an ecological crisis, but that "the ecological crisis is a *moral issue*" (World Day of Peace, 1990, no. 15). Following in this tradition, Pope Benedict XVI's 2008 World Peace Day argued strongly that "'we need to care for the environment: it has been entrusted to men and women to be protected and cultivated with responsible freedom, with the good of all as a constant guiding criterion."[2]

I am not primarily interested in following the ongoing political debates regarding whether there is in fact an environmental crisis. Taking our ecological crisis as given, I am more interested in examining the relationship, or lack thereof, between ecological awareness and Catholic social teaching. It is my contention that, historically speaking, Christianity bears some responsibility for having fostered a destructive and arrogant attitude toward the environment, but that properly understood a respect for nature is an essential part of Christian faith. Indeed, there is reason to believe that Catholic social teaching has the potential to make a unique contribution to contemporary discussions of environmental protection. However, before we can turn directly to this topic we must address the historical roots of our treatment and understanding of nature and the role that Christianity has played in informing this role.

Historical Roots of the Ecological Crisis

Many scholars seeking to explain the historical roots of the mounting ecological crisis point to a particular attitude that nature's sole purpose is to serve humans. This is what philosophers call an anthropocentric view of reality. In a sense, anthropocentrism simply means human-centered. In a sense, all thought is unavoidably anthropocentric in that it takes place from the perspective of human experience. Similarly, since only humans are complex enough to be conscious and free enough to be responsible, we might accurately say that all discussions of ethics—indeed, all branches of investigation—are unavoidably anthropocentric. However, an anthropocentric worldview goes beyond this basic orientation and concludes further that the natural world only has meaning

and value insofar as it is related to humans. It is this further assumption—that nothing has value apart from its relationship to humans—that, scholars argue, has justified and perpetuated a destructive attitude toward the natural world.

In a now famous article entitled "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," Lynn White Jr. argues that Christianity should take much of the blame for creating and perpetuating this destructive attitude. White argues that how people interact with their environment is "deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion."[3] It is our most basic beliefs that inform what we are allowed to do and not do to our natural environment. Given this, White notes that in antiquity pagan animism held that "every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit. . . . Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated."[4] Christianity, on the other hand, inherited from the Judaic tradition a story of creation in which humans are uniquely made in God's image and are given dominion over the created order. With the supplanting of paganism, then, the spirits in nature "evaporate"; the once sacred grove becomes a mere stand of trees to be used for fuel and the once holy mountain becomes a site for a new ski run or mine. "Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions . . . , not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends."[5]

White concludes that Christianity, particularly in its Western form, is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen. "God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man's purposes. And, although man's body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God's image."[6] Thus, White continues, "Despite Copernicus, all the cosmos rotates around our little globe. Despite Darwin, we are *not*, in our hearts, part of the natural process. We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim."[7] After all, Genesis 1 clearly indicates that human beings are to subdue the earth and to have dominion over every living creature (Gen. 1:28), right? According to this interpretation, in making humans divinely appointed despots over nature Christianity is responsible for having created the underlying worldview that justifies the wasteful and indiscriminate destruction of the natural world. There is only one conclusion to be drawn from this: "We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."[8]

Now historically speaking, it is the case that many influenced by Christianity have justified their exploitation of nature by explicitly or implicitly relying on the account of creation in Genesis 1, wherein God gives humans dominion over creation and orders us to subdue it. Historically, then, White's criticisms of

Christianity do have some weight. Christianity has historically encouraged an anthropocentric attitude which has fostered a very destructive understanding of our relationship to nature. What is less certain is the claim that Christianity is inherently or necessarily anthropocentric. Many contemporary theologians and philosophers are approaching this critical question by reexamining what it means to have dominion over creation.

Anne M. Clifford is representative of a growing body of theologians who are placing a renewed focus on the scriptural basis of humanity's relationship with the natural world. In her compelling essay, "Foundations for a Catholic Ecological Theology of God," Clifford agrees with White and others that "for much of the twentieth century, nonhuman nature has been treated by Christian theologians as a mere context in which human beings work out their salvation with the help of God's grace."[9] Yet, as Clifford goes on to note, there is nothing necessary in this interpretation. She begins by explicitly addressing White's claim that Christianity is inherently anthropocentric, arguing instead that if we properly understand our role within creation, we begin to recognize that the Bible is not anthropocentric or human-centered; it is primarily and essentially theocentric, or God-centered. It is only in God that the origin and meaning of all creatures is to be found.[10] This re-centering of the Bible has a potentially dramatic effect on how one interprets the creation stories in general, and the notion of dominion in particular.

Following several other contemporary scholars, Clifford argues that to understand properly the meaning of dominion, one must put it in the context of the story of the great flood.

> In Chapter 6 [of Genesis], we find God deeply grieved about the extent of the wickedness of humans, precipitating an ecological disaster of worldwide proportions. . . . God's directive [to build an ark for all animals] makes the meaning of having dominion clear—it is to see the survival of the other living creatures. . . . The Noahic covenant is a symbol of the unbreakable bond between all creatures and their Creator.[11]

Interpreting dominion in this context emphasizes two things. First, in a covenant God made not only with Noah but with "every living creature" (Gen. 9:9–10), we must remember that, although humans are unique, we are also a part of the interconnected web of nature. Properly understood, therefore, Christianity does not promote an absolute dualism between humans and creation. Although we are uniquely made in God's image, we are fundamentally a part of the natural world; there is only one creation. Second, as Clifford succinctly notes, God's command to build an ark for all animals "makes the meaning of having dominion clear—it is to see the survival of the other living creatures."[12] Understood within the context of the Noahic covenant, therefore, dominion does not give humans license to use nature with impunity. Rather,

to be given dominion is to be charged with the grave responsibility to care for and protect God's creation for present and future generations. A properly theocentric conception of dominion entails responsible stewardship, not arrogant despotism. The earth has not been given to us to exploit for our most trivial desires; it has been entrusted to us to respect and protect.

> When humans abuse the charge of dominion given to them, taking upon themselves the domination of the rest of creation as their possession, instead of respecting the charge entrusted to them by God, all of creation suffers. There is no biblical basis for justifying this exploitation of the earth and its many forms of plant and animal life. Such behavior breaks God's covenant with creation and is a sin against the Creator. Because of such sin, a mournful dirge is heard throughout the land; all of creation suffers.[13]

It is for this reason, perhaps, that John Paul II argues that "Christians . . . [must] realize that their responsibility within creation and their duty towards nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith" (World Day of Peace, 1990, no. 15). Thus, rather than seeing environmental awareness as a movement extrinsic to their own faith, many Christians are beginning to reawaken to what might be called the sacramental role of nature.[14] No longer should Christians see the natural environment as a mere resource to be disposed of as one pleases. Rather, nature provides a unique encounter with God. After all, "from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen" (Ws. 13:5).[15] As a unique overflowing of divine goodness, every creature is revelatory of God; every part of creation is an overflowing of divine goodness.[16]

In this renewed sacramental and scriptural light, not only is there ample reason to reject the view that Christianity inherently or necessarily entails a destructive anthropocentricism, the Christian faith in fact requires that the faithful take seriously their grave responsibility as stewards of creation. According to this model, human beings do not own the earth, but hold it in trust for both present and future generations. Benedict XVI puts this point rather forcefully, arguing that to truly respect the environment "means not selfishly considering nature to be at the complete disposal of our own interests, for future generations also have the right to reap its benefits and to exhibit towards nature the same responsible freedom that we claim for ourselves."[17] By continuing our unsustainable reliance on nonrenewable and heavily polluting energy sources, by continuing to undermine international efforts to curb global climate change, by continuing to ignore the dramatic increase in species extinctions, we are hurting not only ourselves, but also bequeathing to future generations a poorer quality of life than we have inherited.

A tangible sign of this "greening" of Catholic social teaching may be seen in the U.S. Conference of Bishops' creation of an "Environmental

Justice Program."[18] As its name suggests, this program focuses on the often neglected connection between the care for the poor and the care for the earth. Many scholars, both secular and religious, have begun to focus on the fact that poor, minority (e.g., African Americans, Appalachians, Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, and Native Americans), and indigenous people bear disproportionate environmental risk from, among other things, resource depletion, runaway development, environmental pollution, hazardous waste facilities, contaminated food, and pesticides. Both in this country and around the world, the most vulnerable individuals among us are more likely to drink polluted water, breathe polluted air, eat contaminated food, and be less politically empowered to do something about it. This is environmental injustice.

It is this critical connection between social justice and environmental protection that is potentially the most important contribution that Catholic social teaching can make to contemporary discussions of environmental ethics. Any viable solution to our environmental crisis must put at its heart the focus on social justice. As the U.S. bishops put it very eloquently, "A just and sustainable society and world are not an optional ideal, but a moral and practical necessity. Without justice, a sustainable economy will be beyond reach. Without an ecologically responsible world economy, justice will be unachievable."[19] In this light, we begin to see that environmental stewardship is a fundamental part of the Catholic church's commitment to social justice. Indeed, environmental protection is a necessary condition for the achievement of a truly just society dedicated to the protection of life.[20]

In addition to emphasizing the link between environmental and social justice, this conclusion also points to the fact that a consistent respect for life requires the protection of both human and nonhuman forms of life. In John Paul II's words, "Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which are called to join man in praising God" (World Day of Peace, 1990, no. 16). Thus, respect for and protection of nonhuman forms of life is an important part of the culture of life that Catholics seek to foster. Drew Christiansen and Walter Grazer make this important point very aptly:

> In striving to protect the dignity of every person and promote the common good of the human family, particularly the most vulnerable among us, the Church champions the rights of the unborn, helping to lead the national effort to oppose abortion; it endeavors to bring dignity to the poor and help them become full partners in our society; it works to overcome the scourge of racism and bring everyone to the table of the human family; it welcomes the stranger among us; and in all cases, it promotes the family as the center of human culture and moral development. Now, the Church is recognizing that the web of life and the promotion of human dignity are linked to the protection of God's gift of creation.[21]

The U.S. bishops are surprisingly forceful in their inclusion of the respect for nature, going so far as to claim that mistreatment of the natural world not only "diminishes our own dignity and sacredness" and destroys resources needed by future generations, but in fact "contradict[s] what it means to be human. . . . Our tradition," they continue, "calls us to protect the life and dignity of the human person, and it is increasingly clear that this task cannot be separated from the care and defense of all of creation."[22]

As John Paul II noted, our relationship to and treatment of the natural world is of critical importance. "While in some cases the damage already done may well be irreversible, in many other cases it can still be halted. It is necessary, however, that the entire human community—individuals, States and international bodies—take seriously the responsibility that is theirs" (World Day of Peace, 1990, no. 6). John Paul II's call for each of us to take responsibility for our treatment of the earth provides a natural transition to the last part of my comments which, in the spirit of taking responsibility for our treatment of nature, focuses on some very specific things that those of us at colleges and universities can do.

Becoming a responsible environmental steward involves no magic, no mystery. The first step is to become ecologically aware of the impact of your actions, particularly your consumption patterns. The difficult truth is that much of our consumption, particularly in a wealthy country like the United States, is wasteful and unnecessary.[23] Though our population is relatively small, as a nation our ecological footprint is enormous.[24] The first step to diminishing our resource use is to consume less. Walk more and drive less. Turn up your thermostat a few degrees in the summer and turn it down a few degrees in the winter. Use natural light when possible. Drink tap water instead of buying bottled water or soda. Recycle as much as possible, but don't forget the "neglected R's": reduce and reuse.

Being a responsible environmental steward doesn't require that you sell off everything you own and live in a cabin in the woods. Though Americans in particular can and should decrease wasteful consumption, what is also needed is a shift in what we buy. For instance, buying local products not only decreases the pollution caused by transporting items from long distances (e.g., buying fruit grown in Pennsylvania rather than in Chile), it has the added benefit of supporting the local economy. Rather than going to a big-box retailer, visit your local farmer's market. Similarly, buying organic decreases the destructive impact of pesticides and herbicides; it allows farmers to sell their produce at a premium, and it may be healthier to boot. While buying local and organic may cost a few dollars more, buying efficient products often pays for itself. Whether buying a car or a lightbulb, seek out the most efficient products available. All of these examples point to the same conclusion: in our integrated global economy one of the easiest and most potent ways of effecting change is to vote with your dollars.

Yet for college students living in residence halls and eating in dining halls, this is not always easy to do. Nevertheless, there are many things that you can do as a college student to become more environmentally responsible. Perhaps the most important first step is to educate yourself by participating in or organizing curricular and cocurricular activities that will help you and your community become more ecologically aware.[25] For instance, you can enroll in environmental studies or environmental science classes and learn more about subjects such as global warming, conservation biology, or environmental politics. Join or start an environmental stewardship club on campus and organize events that help to focus the community's attention on becoming more environmentally responsible. As you approach graduation, consider taking the "graduation pledge" and commit to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job you consider and try to improve these aspects of any organization for which you work.[26]

As the passage at the start of this essay noted, the stakes are very high. As the U.S. bishops presciently noted in 1991, "Humanity is at a crossroads. . . . We can either ignore the harm we see and witness further damage, or we can take up our responsibilities to the Creator and creation with renewed courage and commitment."[27] The choice before us is clear: we can continue to maintain our despotic delusion or we can humbly accept the burden of responsible stewardship.

Discussion

Common Cause or Someone Else's Problem

By introducing us to the "greening" of Catholic social teaching, Brian Henning calls us to action. Dr. Henning tells me that we understand enough about climate change to act—evidence that global warming is serious, that human industry and habits of consumption make significant contributions to the problem, and that changes on our part will make a difference. However, he also explains that the facts of global climate change and the consensus among scientists are often exaggerated and usually given more certainty than the scientific method is able to achieve. There are reputable scientists who argue that the link between global warming and human activities (e.g., our dependence on fossil fuels) is not completely obvious. Dr. Henning suspects that we exaggerate the evidence in order to move people to act in a world that hopes for scientific absolutes. It is assumed that only infallible proof will lead to decisive action. Note, however, that Dr. Henning's approach, as well as the framework of Catholic social thought, is different. His chapter develops an understanding of our relationship to the earth and the responsibilities that

are inherent in that relationship.[28] It is our relationship to creation that shapes our convictions and actions.

Global climate change raises an interesting set of questions about what moves people to change their lives. A recent study of American attitudes toward global warming is both enlightening and troubling. The study finds that the more informed Americans are about the causes of global warming the less likely we are to take responsibility. It is a common-sense view that information facilitates action. The study, "Personal Efficacy, the Information Environment, and Attitudes Toward Global Warming and Climate Change in the United States," finds the opposite.[29] "Respondents who are better informed about the issue [of global warming] feel less (not more) responsible for it."[30]

According to the study, the more a person trusts the findings of scientists, (1) the more he or she is likely to hope that scientists will find a technological solution, and (2) the more the person is aware that individual actions alone will make little difference. Consider the study's conclusion on the first point.

> Respondents who showed a great deal of confidence that scientists understand global warming and climate change showed significantly *less* concern for the risks of global warming than did those who have lower trust in scientists. Though this effect differs from our expectations, it is consistent with the notion that people trust that scientists will be able, somehow, to devise technical solutions to any problems that arise because of global warming and climate change.[31]

The following quotation pertains to the second point—what seems to be despair about the difference an individual can make.

> As the level of self-reported knowledge increases, the perceived ability to affect global warming outcomes decreases. This is a reasonable finding. Global warming is an extreme collective action dilemma, with the actions of one person having a negligible effect in the aggregate. Informed persons appear to realize this objective fact. Therefore, informed persons can be highly concerned and reasonably pessimistic about their ability to change climate outcomes.[32]

Both findings (points 1 and 2) suggest that knowledge about global warming perpetuates inaction and fits comfortably with the conviction that someone else is going to have to fix it.

The study has striking implications. It is not only those who deny the evidence of global climate change that are inhibiting common efforts for change—change is also stalled by those who are convinced by the evidence. The problem is at least twofold. First, our dependence on technology, which is part of the cause of global warming, is also why we don't think that we need to change the way we live. Technology will provide. Second, most of us are not able to imagine and hope for the widespread cooperation and collective action that are required. Both problems are not unique to our current

environmental crisis: consider how often this book has called for communal and social interdependence, rather than technological expertise, and how often it has appealed to our common responsibilities to the common good. Global warming is a test case for Catholic social teaching. It requires convictions about our duties and our place in relationship to God, our neighbors, and God's creation, cooperation for the good of all, and a commitment to change how we live.

What Can We Do?

Many city, towns, and parishes are trying to change their habits of life. For example, go to the website of Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago (www.oldstpats.org). On the right hand menu, choose "season for social justice" and then the option, "what can you do?" The first imperatives that you will see are: "individually—reduce, reuse, recycle; collectively—advocate." The list of how we can reduce, reuse, and recycle is lengthy. It is likely that you have seen a similar list about energy and water conservation. There is much on St. Pat's list that we can and should do. My one worry is that, at certain points, its call to reduce, reuse, and recycle reads like merely a strategy—another technique for keeping our lives the same (even if using less energy and resources). I do not mean to accuse the people of St. Pat's of anything. It is only that what I assume are a vibrant liturgy and community life are missing from the list of "what we can do?"

The same holds for its call to advocacy. To be an advocate means to promote and support a vision of life, people, and a common course of action. Advocacy in its fullest sense is what Trudy Conway, in chapter 12, calls hospitality; it is a commitment to living truthfully in a way that reconciles people, develops relationships, and sustains a community as it becomes ever more passionate about the truth. If our environmental concerns are reduced to conservation techniques (and to keeping our lives basically the same), they will become a joyless burden. Advocacy as lobbying our legislators is important (as Old St. Patrick's website rightly proposes). But advocacy begins with hospitality. Without a transformed community life, environmentally friendly changes in our lives and the laws that might require change will be like fat-free desserts—a sad imitation of the kind of consumption we really desire. Our efforts to be responsible with our resources and to advocate for collective action require risks of love. The main goal of environmental ethics (within the Catholic frame) is to change how we live in relationship to God, neighbor, and creation—decreasing technological dependence, staying closer to and experiencing the intimacy of home, and increasing our time to live well in friendship with God and neighbor.

Following Pope Benedict XVI, we ought to see environmental issues as a call to community. The following excerpt is from his World Day of Peace address, January 1, 2008 (no. 7).

> The family needs a home, a fit environment in which to develop its proper relationships. *For the human family, this home is the earth*, the environment that God the Creator has given us to inhabit with creativity and responsibility . . . not selfishly considering nature to be at the complete disposal of our own interests. . . . Nor must we overlook the poor, who are excluded in many cases from the goods of creation destined for all . . . it 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.