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The Greening of the Papacy

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and John J. O'Keefe

Introduction

John J. O'Keefe, Creighton University

When the American environmental movement began in the 1960s, one of the markers of its marginal societal status was the nearly complete silence of the Christian churches. There were a few prophetic voices scattered here and there, such as the influential Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, but for the most part even the most progressive Christians expressed little interest in caring for the earth. The word *environmentalist* tended to summon images of hippies and commune dwellers rather than serious minded Christians intent on building a more just world.

This was certainly true of Roman Catholicism, both in its American and global contexts. Indeed, the needs of the earth were not a subject of concern at the Second Vatican Council, which was held between 1962 and 1965. More than any other council in the history of the Catholic Church, Vatican II was deeply committed to engagement with the modern world. The documents of the Council expressed grave concern about the enormous suffering that social change and global development were inflicting on the global poor. Catholics were encouraged to live more deeply into their baptisms and to engage the reality of the twentieth century in all its complexity. Yet, there is no hint that the framers of the Council – the Pope,

the bishops of the world, and the guild of theologians – saw any connection between the challenges they were confronting and the increasing stress that human activity was placing on the planet.

Of course, this inattention to environmental issues extended well beyond the Council and its framers. Pope Paul VI (1963–1978), who was charged with implementing the Council, never focuses on the environment even in his most progressive writings. For example, in his social encyclical *Populorum Progreſsio* (1967), he writes eloquently about the plight of the poor in an increasingly globalized world, he worries about the increasing gap between those who have and those who have not, but he does not betray any anxiety about the state of the planet. Although Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, and Lynn White Jr. wrote his famous essay *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis* in 1967, the sentiments expressed in these seminal environmental works had penetrated in no way into the Church’s centuries-old social doctrine.

This situation is now in the process of changing. As the environmental movement has moved toward the mainstream in the United States and Europe and as it has gained a foothold even in the developing world, there has been a corresponding increased awareness of the issues among religious leaders, including the leaders of the Catholic Church. In his encyclical *Sollicitudo rei Socialis* (1987), Pope John Paul II became the first pope in the history of the Church to write about the environment in the context of the Church’s social mission. John Paul’s “green” opening helped to encourage local conferences of Catholic bishops to make statements about the environment and our responsibility to care for it. Especially worthy of mention in this context are statements issued by the bishops of Appalachia (1995) and the Pacific Northwest (2001). While these efforts were tiny compared to other episcopal interventions in say, economics or abortion, they do represent a notable shift in awareness within Catholic leadership.

Pope Benedict XVI has continued this trend. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) and in a variety of other written statements the Pope acknowledges the depth of the environmental problems we face. He accepts the reality of climate change and the destructive power of unregulated capitalism. He also draws explicit connections between earth care and the moral duties of Christians in a way that many conservative Christians might find surprising. Indeed, some have gone so far as to call Benedict “the green Pope” to underscore the real and sustained effort that he has made to encourage Catholics to attend to this increasingly grave situation.

While this greening of the Catholic magisterium is certainly welcome and while it may signal the beginning of a much larger movement within the Catholic Church and other Christian communities, there are aspects of the theology embedded in these statements that merit further scrutiny. Since the 1960s it has been common in some circles within the environmental community to blame the book of Genesis, in particular Genesis 1:26, for our current ecological malaise. In this passage God famously bestows upon humans “dominion” over the earth and its creatures. Critics of the Christian tradition claim that this text contains an implicit “anthropocentrism,” that has functioned like a sleeping virus in the Western cultural imagination and that has lately emerged as a full infection. According to this perspective, the claim that humans have “dominion” allowed us to think that we are vastly

superior to the rest of the creation. This fantasy, so the critics say, when coupled with Platonic metaphysics and modern technology, has led to the destructive practices of the modern world. What is needed instead, again according to this argument, is a robust eschewal of anthropocentrism and the conscious cultivation of a more holistic and eco-centric worldview.

Most careful observers of the ecological legacy of the Christian theological and intellectual traditions recognize that these efforts to blame our current environmental alienation on an original anthropocentrism are deeply flawed. The biblical tradition cannot be reduced to a single passage from one chapter of Genesis. Similarly, while it may be true that Plato and later Platonists believed that the distance between the material and intelligible worlds was wide indeed, they also conceived matter and mind to be parts of a united and living cosmos in which all played a part. There is certainly a thread, or perhaps even a woven filament, connecting these ancient cosmologies to our modern attitudes toward nature, but tracing current attitudes to ancient sources requires diligent scholarship and patient care that is sometimes missing from the theological discussion.

As humans, however, we tend to like big theses with huge explanatory power, and the idea that ancient anthropocentrism has been a sleeping demon come finally to destroy us all appeals at many levels. Human beings are impacting the earth on a scale unimaginable in the past and with a vigor that, if unchecked, will certainly produce massive disruption and suffering. In the face of this reality, Genesis 1:26 can be a tempting target. Because many have used Genesis in this way, it has tended to produce an unnecessary defensiveness in the Christian theological response. Thus, many episcopal statements and scores of works on eco-theology focus discussion on a reading of the word “dominion” that does not imply “domination.” This has led to endless attempts to build a Christian theology of earth care around the word “stewardship,” a word of dubious credentials for Christian theological discourse. This defensive stance has also produced a truncation of the discussion, creating the impression that Genesis 1 is the only biblical text with relevance for environmental reflection. However, the creation of an environmental theology robust enough to respond to the crisis before us will require more than playing defense: it will require creative and sustained engagement with the entire tradition.

On the one hand, it seems clear to the editors of this volume that the statements of the Pope and of bishops’ conferences around the world too often reflect this intellectual defensiveness in their engagement with the environmental crisis. On the other hand, we consider it to be an unqualified good that the leader of the world’s largest body of Christians and many bishops have decided to address the question at all. While more work needs to be done, we are convinced that the engagement of the Pope especially carries significance and merits attention and discussion by the intellectual community at a Catholic university.

For this reason we convened a symposium of scholars at Creighton University in February 2012 to explore, from a variety of intellectual disciplines, “The Greening of the Papacy.” The participants in the symposium were asked to reflect specifically upon the greening of recent papal pronouncements, especially those of Pope Benedict XVI. The result is this collection of essays. As one would expect in a scholarly discussion, the essays are both admiring and critical, but also, we think, constructive. Above all we hope that they

collectively contribute in some way to a much-needed conversation about how the Catholic Christian community can best use its many resources to help nurture the emergence of a more sustainable world.

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