



*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

---

The Kripke Center

Supplement 9 (2013)

---

## The Greening of the Papacy

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

### Whence the Urgency of Benedict's Green Streak?

#### Scripture? Philosophy? Or the Crisis Itself?

Dennis Hamm, S.J., Creighton University

#### Introduction

Four years ago, *Newsweek* journalist Daniel Stone wrote:

It may be known for sending out iconic smoke signals when a new pope is elected, but the Vatican is actually the world's only sovereign state that can lay claim to being carbon-neutral. That means that all greenhouse gas emissions from the Holy See are offset through renewable energies and carbon credits. Last summer the city-state's ancient buildings were outfitted with solar panels intended to be a key source of electricity, and an eco-restoration firm donated enough trees in a Hungarian national park to nullify all carbon emitted from Vatican City, which takes up one-fifth of a square mile.

Both moves were embraced by Pope Benedict XVI, who not only oversees the global church, he serves as the chief administrator of the operation of the Vatican. And in both religious and secular circles Benedict has earned the title of “green pope.” In addition to boosting efforts to make Vatican City more environmentally efficient, he also uses Roman Catholic doctrine to emphasize humanity’s responsibility to care for the planet (2008).

Since that report in April 2008, Pope Benedict XVI has devoted key documents to the issue of environment – most notably his recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (“Charity in Truth”) in 2009, and at least two World Day of Peace messages, one in the year before and one the year after *Caritas in Veritate*. What is the source of the Holy Father’s urgency regarding the care for the environment? Is he simply picking up on worldwide concern about climate change, and has reached into the Church’s tradition for rhetorical resources to rally his Church to help meet a planetary emergency? That is one way of interpreting the Pope’s actions. But my reading of his recent writings convinces me that something deeper is going on. Benedict is responding out of his personal assimilation of a long tradition of Christian creation theology, based in Scripture and elaborated philosophically in the post-biblical tradition. The purpose of this paper is to probe that vision as it is expressed in *Caritas in Veritate*.

The Pope’s treatment of environmental issues in this letter is no mere sidebar. It is embedded in the presentation of his vision of creator and creation. This vision affects the Pope in two ways. First, it informs how he *interprets* the crisis (human misbehavior towards the earth as a violation of a divine gift and a profound neglect of duty). Second, the vision *motivates his response* to that faith-perceived crisis. Benedict deals with environment most specifically in the second half of chapter four, following up on a discussion of rights and duties regarding family and the economy, but he thoroughly builds the foundation for this discussion in the introduction and in the first three chapters by sketching his larger vision regarding creator and creatures. This paper will mainly focus on that vision. If one skips the early part of the letter and goes immediately to Benedict’s specific treatment of the ecological crisis, one misses the vision and motives that animate his discourse.

The title itself is significant: *Caritas in Veritate*, “Love in Truth.” Our usual way of linking love and truth is to hear “truth,” in that context, as fidelity – as in “I’ll always be true to you,” or “You are my true love.” Benedict would appreciate those realities, but he has something else in view in his title. It is the *caritas* he wrote about in his previous encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), the love that seeks the good of the other, with the emphasis in that letter on God’s love of human beings. In this letter the emphasis is mainly on the love to which the human family is called, the love that is both a response to God as ultimate Giver and the love that seeks the good of other human beings, or in this context, the good of the whole person and of every person, and in the global context, what Pope John XXIII taught us to call “the universal common good.”

And so the *truth* he is talking about is the conformity of our minds to two realities (a) the nature of the human person (any and every person) and (b) the nature of the world (i.e., the created universe, what God meant it to be, and what human beings have made of it, for better and for worse). Without truth about these things, love does not know where to go

with its desire to do good. Without a vision grounded in “the way things are,” love can misfire and cause damage. Truth about the nature of humanity and the nature of the rest of creation is the vision that best guides human loving. Understood this way, truth is the antidote to the *relativism* that so concerns Benedict. If *Deus Caritas Est* was about *God’s* love as the source of human love and about the call to implement that love in meeting the immediate needs of other human beings, *Caritas in Veritate* broadens the discussion to the full context of all creation and all human beings, alive or yet to be born, in the part of creation we know about, planet number three in this solar system.

What prompted this stretch to the whole world and everybody in it is that same thing that prompted the Pope to make the human family and its responsibility to its “house” (the environment) the main topic of his World Day of Peace message in 2008 (“The Human Family, A Community of Peace”). This defender of life may well have been aroused by reports of the increasing fragility of the environment, of the human factor in increasing that fragility, and the urgency to get up and do things that promise to stem the damage. Whatever part those considerations played in his thinking, he did not simply pass on the bad news of carbon footprints, peak oil, pollution, and the hastening melting of glaciers, and then urge practical solutions. Like his predecessors (John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II), he recognizes that this crisis is not first of all a technical problem requiring a technical fix. It is a moral problem whose remedy is nothing less than conversion of hearts and a clarification of the truth about nature, human and nonhuman as creatures of a sustaining God. Instinctively, he draws upon the resources of Catholic tradition about creation and redemption. He takes the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* (1967) to pick up on Pope Paul’s theme of integral human development – renewing the way the world is run with respect to the goal of full human flourishing – that is, the flourishing of all persons, and every dimension of each person – avoiding the pitfalls both state-ism and individualism (or, what today we encounter today as libertarianism).

In his discourse about this truth to which we must be re-awakened, he emphasizes two aspects in particular – “gratuitousness” (hereafter “gratuity”) and solidarity. To get a grip on those two abstract concepts the human brain may reach for concrete images, such as a tip left for a waiter and a Polish labor movement. But Benedict uses these terms to name deep matters of both head and hart. I will quote nuggets from his text and comment briefly.

### Gratuity

Benedict asserts the theme of creation as *gift* early in the introduction: “Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. That light is both the light of reason and the light of faith, through which the intellect attains to the natural and supernatural truth of charity: it grasps its meaning as *gift, acceptance, and communion*” (2009: 3). Further on, he elaborates the aspect of *gift* by employing St. Paul’s favorite term for this part of the Christian experience of God – “grace.” “Charity is love received and given,” he writes.

It is “grace” (*charis*). Its source is the wellspring of the Father’s love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Love comes down to us from the Son. It is *creative* love, through which we have our being; it is *redemptive* love, through which we are *recreated*. Love is revealed and made present by Christ (cf. John 13:1) and “poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5). As the *objects*

of God's love, men and women become *subjects* of charity, they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God's charity and *weave networks of charity* (2009: 5, italics added).

This vision of human beings as *gift* – first, simply as being, as creatures, and then as *gifted* with the power to pass on the gift to others in “networks of charity” – underlies everything he says in chapter four in this letter regarding the human duty to care for creation. It is the reason why Benedict's expression of the Christian approach to the environment can be characterized *neither as bio-centric nor as anthropocentric*. For Benedict, the Christian vision regarding our relation to the goods of the Earth is *theo-centric*, with, of course, a special role for the human creature among the others.

In our North American discourse, in which *charity* is applied mainly to meeting immediate, short-term needs (e.g., with soup kitchens and emergency housing) without necessarily addressing the unjust *structures* that underlie joblessness, hunger, and homelessness, we sometimes *oppose* justice to charity. Benedict, following Paul VI, turns that around. Justice, an absolute necessity, comes first. “*Charity goes beyond justice,*” he writes (italics in original),

because to love is to give, to offer what is “mine” to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is “his,” what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting. I cannot “give” what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice. . . . Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity. . . . On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the *earthly city* according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and receiving. The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God's love in human relationships as well, it gives theological and salvific value to all commitment for justice in the world (2009: 6).

Here reason works philosophically arguing that charity presumes and exceeds justice. As mentioned earlier, when Benedict speaks of “charity” he means it in the biblical sense of *agápē*, the love that seeks the good of the other and goes beyond reciprocity and mere fairness.<sup>1</sup>

Benedict calls Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) “the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age.” In his 1967 encyclical, Paul VI identifies the project of “integral human development” as the “development of the whole man and of all men.” That was a way of reinforcing John

---

<sup>1</sup> It is surprising to me that Benedict does not here enlist the imitation of the gratuity of the Father in the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon the Mount: “But I say to you, love your enemies and prayer for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust” (Matthew 5:44-45).

XXIII's conviction that, in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, seeking "the common good" was necessarily to seek the *universal* common good. The passing of four more decades has brought about the economic and social networking that we call globalization. This new dimension of human coexistence leads Benedict to assert:

Love in truth – *caritas in veritate* – is a great challenge for the Church in a world that is becoming progressively and pervasively globalized. The risk for our time is that the *de facto* interdependence of people and nations is not matched by ethical interaction of consciences and minds that would give rise to truly human development. Only in *charity, illumined by the light of reason and faith*, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value. The sharing of goods and resources, from which authentic development proceeds, is not guaranteed by merely technical progress and relationships of utility, but by the potential of love that overcomes evil with good (cf. Rom 12:21), opening up the path towards reciprocity of consciences and liberties (2009: 9).

I would add that the truth of the human solidarity that underlies that universal common good that we are called to address requires *the sense of creation as gift* that animates the love that the project of integral human development requires. Benedict finds the basis of both gratuity and solidarity in truths accessible to both reason and faith. Benedict invokes the classic texts from the Scriptures and tradition to support his convictions regarding gratuity and solidarity. These references invite reflection and elaboration.

### The Gratuity of Creation in Scripture

Benedict, of course, draws on the creation narratives of Genesis 1 and 2. He also draws on the wider wisdom tradition to acknowledge that all creatures express aspects of their creator (see Romans 1). But this is particularly true of the human creature (male and female together) "made in the image and likeness" of God (Genesis 1:26-27). The tradition has interpreted this language especially in terms of humanity's capacity for understanding and exercising free choice. As a student of Scripture, I have wondered why more has not been made of Gerhard von Rad's observation that Middle Eastern kings were known to have placed images of themselves, statues, as signs that they were the owners of the land on which those images stood. In that understanding, the fact that humanity, eventually occupying virtually every place on earth, is said to bear the image and likeness of God means that the creating Lord is owner of everything, *especially* of the creatures that explicitly bear his image (60). "The earth is the Lord's," as Psalm 24 declares. Further implication: the commission to subdue the earth and have dominion over other living things can only be understood as serving the Master who created it all. Lynne White was no doubt correct when he ascribed to this text the blame for many Christians' exploitation of the goods of the earth. Many have indeed justified their abuse of earth's resources by reading the text in this way. The larger context of the Torah, especially Genesis and Exodus, supports the Catholic tradition's principle of "the universal destination of all goods" – meaning that the goods of creation are meant to serve the needs of all, and that private ownership is warranted as a means of managing that prior principle of the *universal* destination of goods. Von Rad's cultural

interpretation of the meaning of a king's image can serve to reinforce the notion of the divine ownership of everything and human stewardship of the Owner's property.

When Benedict elaborates on the relationship between human beings and the rest of creation, he wisely passes over the troublesome language of "subduing" and "having dominion" of the Priestly account (Genesis 1:26-27) and refers, instead, to the Yahwist's imagery of Genesis 2:15. Even in Paradise, humanity is given work to do, here not understood as punishment but rather as a role of co-creation, to "till and keep" the earth. He writes,

*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 (Rom 1:20) and his love for humanity. It is destined to be "recapitulated" in Christ at the end of time (see Eph 1:9-10; Col 1:19-20). Thus it too is a "vocation." Nature is at our disposal not as "a heap of scattered refuse" [a phrase from Heraclitus] but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order "to till it and keep it" (Gen 2:15) (2009: 48).

Benedict also invokes another biblical concept, but in this case without citation of a particular text. He refers to "that *covenant between human beings and environment*, which should mirror the creative love of God" (2009: 50, 69). I can only think that he refers to Genesis 9:9, the covenant that God establishes (or renews? – discussed below) between himself, Noah and his family, *and all living things*, with the promise never to destroy all bodily creatures with the waters of a flood. The covenant is variously described six more times as

- "my covenant with you" (v. 11);
- "the covenant between me and you and every living creature with you" (v. 12);
- "the *covenant between me and the earth*" (v. 13; italics added);
- "the covenant between me and you and all living beings" (v. 15);
- "the covenant that I have established between God and all living beings – all mortal creatures that are upon the earth" (v. 16); and
- "the covenant that I have established between me and all mortal creatures that are upon the earth" (v. 17).

The fact that the fourth reference to the covenant (the middle one of the seven) describes it as "the *covenant between me and the earth*" surely affirms a profound solidarity between the human creature and everything else in the relationship of creatures with God.

It is likely that the Priestly author who assembled the primeval history of Genesis 1-11 understood this to be a covenant already established in the origination and sustaining of creation from the start. For when God instructs Noah to build the ark and announces his plan to destroy by flooding "everything on earth," he says, "But with you I will establish my covenant" (Genesis 6:18); it is quite possible to hear this as an affirmation of a relationship already established. The expression "*my covenant*" sounds like a reference to a covenant

already established. And the verb (Hebrew: *bakimoti et habriti*; Greek: *stēsō*) can be rendered “maintain” or “uphold,” as it does with regard to the covenant in 1 Maccabees 2:27.<sup>2</sup> Further, God is said to send a wind to cause the waters to subside when he “remembered” Noah and the animals, wild and tame, that were with him in the ark. “Remembered” is language that suggests recalling a covenant already established between God and Noah. And so the covenant of Genesis 9:9 may well refer to an affirmation or renewal of a covenant that was coterminous with the act of creation itself. What is not in doubt is that the human author of this text pictures humanity and the rest of creation, “the earth,” *in this thing together* – something that can answer to Benedict’s phrase “the covenant between man and his environment” – a covenant established by the Creator and surely not on humanity’s initiative.

There is even more in Genesis to sustain Benedict’s vision. Even if we did not have those initial chapters of Genesis, one can imagine a 21<sup>st</sup> century author who wanted to create a poetic narrative to express the relationships among creatures as we have come to know those relationships today coming up with similar imagery. He or she could hardly do better than to portray those relationships in the imagery of Genesis 1 and 2. A narrative that builds to the creation of humankind as its climax, and frames the rest of creation as a habitat for humanity, reflects well the cosmic story that science tells of a universe that appears to be “fine tuned” to produce life, and the human kind as its most complex form of syntropy – what some cosmologists call “the anthropic principle” (see Mooney).

What better contemporary Hebrew name could we give to the product of the process of evolution than the name *adam*, after the *adama* (“ground”), the clay that contains the elements that compose him/her and the ground that sustains the food that sustains him/her. And knowing what we do today regarding the process of soil formation, green plants, and photosynthesis, what a stroke of genius it would be to devote a separate day – say, the pivotal third one – to the creation from the earth of plants and fruit trees – a crucial message to people of our day whose industrialized agriculture can delude us into thinking that food is a human artifact. Virtually all the energy on planet earth comes from the sun and we, the most complex organization of matter and energy on earth, have only one way to access the sun’s energy, the mediation of green plants, which alone can perform photosynthesis and, thereby, turn light from the sun into matter that can be ingested and transformed by the human digestive system. The ancient poetry of Genesis 1 can still express real things about our “given” and universal human nature as God’s creatures.

And human solidarity? The roots for that are in the same imagery of Genesis 1 and 2. That the Priestly author of Genesis 1:27 can speak of the creation of *ha adam* in one clause as *him* and in the next clause say, “male and female he created *them*” indicates that this narrative entails the whole of humanity. Further, whereas the text speaks of plants, trees, and animals created in various *kinds*, humanity is not said to come in *kinds*. Whatever the intent of the Priestly author, this use of language reflects powerfully what DNA studies have revealed

---

<sup>2</sup> Other places where this expression refers to the maintenance of a covenant already established are Leviticus 26:9 Genesis 17:7, 19, 21 Exodus 6:4; Deuteronomy 8:18; 9:5 LXX Psalm 104:10; LXX Jeremiah 41:18 (MT 43:18).

about the human family, namely, that there is no biological foundation for the concept of “race.” For all our diversity of cultures and skin color, we know now that there is only one human *kind*. This conclusion from science lends force to Benedict’s conviction that all of us have good reason to discuss what he calls the grammar of nature, and rights and duties that are “given” in the structure of human nature. And that tradition interfaces with other cultures and religious traditions. Cicero, that consummate pagan, could, without benefit of the Abrahamic traditions, assert with conviction as a maxim, “We were not born for ourselves alone.” And Malcolm X, seeking the core truth of his adopted faith, could make the *hajj* to Mecca, find in the overwhelming immersion in human diversity a profound sense of human solidarity, and return to his native land converted from his anti-white racism, ready to preach the gospel of one human family under one God . . . when he was shot down.

I think Benedict is right about the Christian mission today. We have a vision about charity in truth that can not only sustain us but also help us generate a cross cultural dialogue about our common origins and destiny that could move us to a sustainable way of serving the universal common good on this fragile planet.

### Conclusions

When Pope Benedict XVI acts to decrease the carbon footprint of Vatican City and devotes several major speeches and a key portion of a major encyclical to ecological issues, he is not just being trendy. His knowledge of the Catholic creation theology, as found in both Scripture and tradition, has prepared him to take seriously the data of science. His Augustinian convictions about human proclivity to selfishness and the absolute need for divine help have prepared him to perceive our environmental crises not simply as a technical problem but as a moral challenge.

Benedict’s finding in Scripture a privileged role with respect to other creatures does not render him guilty of the charge of a myopic anthropocentrism. His world picture is rooted in classic texts from Genesis and Romans 1. The cosmic vision embodied in the final redaction of the Primeval History of Genesis 1-11 contains a covenant of creation that entails solidarity between human beings and the rest of creation. Strikingly, the phenomenology of the place of human life within the cosmic story (even without reference to God) confirms the solidarity of the human with the rest of earthly life. The privileged, albeit limited, role attributed by Scripture to humanity within that covenant can only be understood as framed within the larger vision rightly identified as *theo-centric*. Everything is from God, for God. What Benedict ascribes to the human role is fully understood within the centrality of God as the ultimate Giver of all that is.<sup>3</sup> If one seeks Benedict’s rationale for his treatment of environmental issues in the second half of the fourth section of *Caritas in Veritate*, one needs to read carefully his God-centered vision as he lays it out in the early part of the letter.

---

<sup>3</sup> The contribution of Ronald A. Simkins to this volume, “Anthropocentrism and the Place of Humans in the Biblical Tradition,” rightly argues that the treatment of humanity in the various traditions of Scripture is best described as *theocentric* rather than anthropocentric. My paper affirms that thesis; where I differ is that I claim that the biblical traditions affirm a special role of responsibility for humanity within that theocentric worldview, and that Benedict XVI develops his treatment of human blame for much of the degradation of the planet and of human responsibility for its rescue and care as rooted in that theocentric biblical vision.

The natural law approach to human rights and duties has promise of clarifying cross cultural discourse. If Catholic talk about a privileged place for the human part of nature seems to some a dangerous anthropocentrism leading to the exploitation of the rest of nature and what some identify as animal “rights,” a special human role within a theocentric vision can be clarifying. Within that vision humans have a profound duty to steward all of planetary life. Applying rights language to animals and other parts of nature is a powerful rhetorical trope, but such talk is a category mistake. Persons have rights, which correspond to duties, which can only be carried out by agents possessed of free will. That is why we never speak of the *duties* of animals or plants. Duties and rights go together. The human duty toward animals and other growing things requires that we respect them as expressions of their Creator and things with their own intrinsic value.

Like all recent popes since the 1960s, Pope Benedict addresses all persons of good will. The existence of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights encourages him to urge that all of us on planet Earth have a stake in coming to a common understanding about the truth of our shared human nature. For only this will enable us to agree on ways of meeting our environmental crisis that will foster human dignity.

Universal though his message is, Benedict knows that his fellow Roman Catholics have special reasons to respond to our ecological crisis. We are heirs of a robust creation theology. While many members of other denominations have found the assimilation of the theory of evolution difficult and a challenge to faith, Catholics in general, thanks to a long tradition of scientific research in Church-sponsored universities and a way of reading Scripture with attention to literary forms and cultural settings, have had little trouble in integrating science and faith. Moreover, we make sacramental use of water, bread, wine, oil and fire. Before we join the self-offering of Jesus in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, we offer what we refer to as “fruit of the earth and work of human hands.” Though most of us live our lives in large urban centers, we continue to read Sacred Scriptures that remind us of agricultural realities, growing seasons, and the one God acknowledged as creator of everyone and everything. Our social tradition teaches us to seek the common good, indeed the *universal* common good, and to live out our civic lives not only in pursuit of our vested interests but the good of all, and to ensure that, a special attention to the poor and to the social structures that keep them poor (see USCCB: 1905-12). Heirs of such a tradition should be well positioned to appreciate Pope Benedict’s insistence that our ecological crisis is not simply a technical problem but a moral challenge, requiring nothing less than conversion of hearts, everyone’s, to the Giver and Sustainer of creation and the solidarity of the human family.

## Bibliography

Benedict XVI

- 2005      *Deus Caritas Est*. Available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html).
- 2007      “The Human Family, A Community of Peace.” Message for the 41<sup>st</sup> World Day of Peace 2008. Available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20071208\\_xli-world-day-peace\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20071208_xli-world-day-peace_en.html).

- 2009 *Caritas in Veritate*. Available online at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html).
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius  
44 BC *De officiis* (On Duties) 1.7.22.
- Mooney, S.J., Christopher F.  
1944 "The Anthropic Principle in Cosmology and Theology." *Horizons* 21: 105-29.
- Rad, Gerhard von.  
1972 *Genesis: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster.
- Stone, Daniel  
2008 "The Green Pope." *Newsweek* (April 16). Available online at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/04/16/the-green-pope.html>.
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops  
1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Liguori: Liguori Publications for USCCB and Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- White, Jr., Lynne T.  
1967 "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155 (March 10): 1203-7.