



The Green Popes: *Benedict XVI and John Paul II on the Environment*



by
Brother Ignatius Schweitzer, O.P.

The Knights of Columbus presents
The Veritas Series
“Proclaiming the Faith in the Third Millennium”

**The Green Popes:
Benedict XVI and John Paul II
on the Environment**

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Nihil Obstat:
Rev. Msgr. Charles V. Antonicelli, J.D., S.T.L., J.C.L.
Censor Deputatus

Imprimatur
Most Rev. Donald W. Wuerl, S.T.D.
Archbishop of Washington
Archdiocese of Washington
March 17, 2010

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Printed in the United States of America

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The Green Popes: Benedict XVI and John Paul II on the Environment¹

Br. Ignatius John Schweitzer, O.P.

On April 17, 2008 the secular magazine *Newsweek* released an article on Pope Benedict XVI entitled “The Green Pope.” The first line announces “Benedict XVI has embraced environmentalism.”² The article hails his “environmental leadership” and goes on to describe ways in which the papacy has been green-friendly. For instance, the Vatican has installed solar panels on many of its buildings in order to conserve energy and preserve non-renewable resources. Further, in the Vatican City’s name, enough trees have been planted in a Hungarian forest to offset its carbon dioxide emissions, making the Vatican the only sovereign state in the world that can claim to be carbon-neutral.

Since this *Newsweek* article was published, the Vatican has done even more to protect the environment. In June of 2009, the director of the energy policy program of the United Nations visited Vatican City for an evaluation. He raved about the great work that is being done, saying “It’s impressive they’re actually doing what some people only talk about and [they] are doing it in a significant way.”³ In particular, he noted two projects that are currently underway. One is to build a large solar farm on property that the Vatican owns on the outskirts of Rome; this will boost even more the Vatican’s independence from fossil fuels. Second, the Vatican is undertaking an analysis of their energy consumption to pinpoint waste and become even more energy efficient.

Pope Benedict XVI, an Ally of Environmentalists

Not only are *Newsweek* and the United Nations impressed, but many who have dedicated their lives to saving the environment admire what the pope has done. Surfing the web reveals a number of sites that pay homage to Pope Benedict and the measures he has taken on behalf of the environment. These are people who otherwise would have no respect for

the Catholic Church, but now look to Pope Benedict XVI as a friend and ally in their concern for the environment. One might wonder if the pope really is an ally to these environmentalists who have no use for the Church he represents.

Pope Benedict XVI really is an ally and friend to all those concerned about the world. He truly stands in solidarity with environmentalists as they work for a healthy planet. However, like a genuine ally and friend, Pope Benedict also challenges environmentalists to do better. While supporting them in their work for planet earth, the pope has also pointed out that environmentalists are often blind to the larger issues of life. He has said “The primary dimension of morality stems from the innate dignity of human life (from the moment of conception to natural death) a dignity conferred by God himself. God’s loving act of creation must be understood as a whole. How disturbing it is that not infrequently the very social and political groups that, admirably, are most attuned to the awe of God’s creation pay scant attention to the marvel of life in the womb.”⁴ Benedict XVI places ecology where it belongs: namely, in the larger context of the good of human beings in their full reality. He insists that the physical, psychological, moral, and spiritual well being of all persons must be considered.

The Tradition of Church Teaching on the Environment

Pope Benedict XVI places ecology in the context of a larger Catholic worldview, and he proposes the only ecology that will ultimately save planet earth: one that follows God’s plan for creation. However, the “green pope” does not stand alone. He stands in the line of a rich tradition of Catholic teaching on creation and the good stewardship of that gift.

Although the term *ecology* was coined in 1866, the green movement has been strong only in the past 50 years.⁵ Advances in the sciences have helped people to become more conscious of the many ways in which their actions affect creation. These discoveries entail new responsibilities in the good stewardship of the earth. As understanding of the environment and the impact of humans has grown, so the popes have slowly applied the

Catholic tradition on creation and stewardship to the new findings of ecology. For example, in 1961 Pope John XXIII made a plea against “destroying nature.”⁶ Also, in 1971, Pope Paul VI expressed concern that by “an ill-considered exploitation of nature,”⁶ especially through “pollution and refuse,” the environment is at risk of becoming intolerable for future ages.⁷

I. Pope John Paul II and the Moral Dimension of Ecology

In a striking way, Pope Benedict XVI’s predecessor, Pope John Paul II, understood that environmental problems are ultimately grounded in moral problems, especially the problem of consumerism. The papacy of John Paul II was marked by his promotion of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. With respect to the environment, the late pope holds the unique distinction of dedicating entire papal texts to ecological concerns. On the World Day of Peace, January 1st of 1990, John Paul II was supposed to speak about peace, but surprisingly he spoke about the environment, indicating that they are related issues. Like Benedict, John Paul II saw environmental concerns only within the larger context of human good. Pope John Paul’s claim is that the lack of peace in the world and the lack of environmental stability spring from the same root, which is human sin. In other words, the ecological crisis is, at its root, a moral problem.

Sin and its Effect on Creation

John Paul II began his talk with a reflection on the Creation account in Genesis, in which unfolds God’s plan for creation. God created

¹ For representative papers, see the following: D.S. Krause et al., “Multi-Organ, Multi-Lineage Engraftment by a Single Bone Marrow-Derived Stem Cell.” *Cell* 105 (2001): 369-377; and A. Ianus et al., “In vivo derivation of glucose-competent pancreatic endocrine cells from bone marrow without evidence of cell fusion.” *J Clin Invest*. 111 (2003): 843-850. For a review of the scientific literature, see M. Serafini and C.M. Verfaillie, “Pluripotency in Adult Stem Cells: State of the Art.” *Semin Reprod Med*. 24 (2006): 379-388.

² For a comprehensive discussion of regenerative medicine, see R.L. Gardner, “Stem cells and regenerative medicine: principles, prospects and problems.” *C R Biol*. 330 (2007): 465-473.

the world, and all that is in it, and proclaimed it to be good. Man and woman, especially, were very good. The created world was entrusted to the care of human beings, and Adam and Eve cared for the Garden of Eden. In this, mankind was supposed to imitate God the Creator. By sharing in God's plan for creation, humans act as co-creators with God, and are to have dominion over the rest of creation. Dominion, however, is not domination, and use is not abuse. Being good stewards involves respecting the gifts of creation while using them wisely. By following God's wisdom in His plan for creation, mankind would have lived in harmony and peace. But Adam and Eve broke from this plan and so broke from peace. Their original sin affected all of creation, and the two were banished from Eden. John Paul II insists, "When man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order. If man is not at peace with God, then earth itself cannot be at peace: 'Therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the air and even the fish of the sea are taken away' (Hos 4:3)."⁸

The biblical view of the effect of sin on the rest of creation is not mere poetry or metaphor. The pope indicates a few examples of immoral behavior causing ecological problems. Consider unjust structures of poverty. It is the poor farmers who must overtax the land in order to harvest enough crops to make a living. It is the poor countries that must expend their natural resources and cut down their forests in order to survive in the worldwide market. Consider the lack of respect for life. In factories, excessive pollution often occurs because the desire to make money trumps the dignity of the workers employed. Individual workers can be degraded, and whole countries held in slave-like labor conditions, all so that more goods can be produced, which, of course, increases pollution. The immoral behavior which drives this, and what the pope highlights at the heart of the problem, is a mentality and lifestyle driven by consumerism. He notes:

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it *takes a serious look at its life style*. In many parts of the

world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause.... The seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of man's moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few.⁹

Again the pope highlights the fact that ecological problems cannot be solved merely on the level of policy. Since ecological problems are, at their root, moral problems, there must primarily be an interior conversion, and simplicity and daily sacrifice must be part of the solution. Consumerism must be replaced with an attitude and lifestyle that place the common good before personal pleasure.

Being versus Having: Moral Character versus Consumerism

In the social encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II considers the problem of consumerism by making the distinction between possessions and identity: *having* versus *being*.¹⁰ His reflections can serve as an examination of conscience. First, the pope insists that there is nothing wrong with seeking a higher quality of life as long as it does not become excessive and beyond reason. However, he insists just as strongly that quality of life entails *being* more than *having*. A good life is not about *having* many things for personal enjoyment or status, as if he who dies with the most toys wins. Rather, a good life is about *being*: it is about becoming a person of upright character who is of benefit to others.

A mentality driven by consumerism thinks only about having and consuming. This attitude must be overcome by considering economic

³ I am indebted to Michael J. Perry for this notion of human dignity, which I take with some modification from his book, *The Idea of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 13.

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 356

decisions in light of the highest values of human existence. Pope John Paul II sets a criterion for individual economic decisions. He says “the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors [that should] determine consumer choices, savings and investments.”¹¹ Perhaps a practical example may clarify his teaching.

Consider the extraordinary example of buying a boat.¹² Perhaps someone wants to buy a boat to improve the quality of recreation with family and friends. This is a noble goal and pertains to the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others. However, must one buy the newest and best model of boat to effectively accomplish this worthy goal? Would a simpler model suffice, and perhaps put more emphasis on the persons who use the boat rather than on the boat itself? In fact, the very community-building activity that a family needs may be to bail water out of a leaky boat *together*. For, in general, a simpler product often entails more work, and working together often brings people together. One might further ask, is a boat really necessary? Would a used one suffice? Could one boat be purchased with a sibling, and shared among the two families? These are the sort of questions one must ask in order to place economic decisions in the context of the higher values that should shape them. Buying a boat is an extraordinary example, but developing the habit of this sort of examination of conscience before making purchases places the emphasis on an improvement of *being* rather than on

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 356.

⁶ For a detailed discussion and defense of the intrinsic nature of human dignity especially within the context of a liberal society, see my essay N. Austrriaco, “Debating embryonic dignity in a liberal society.” *Stem Cell Rev.* 1 (2005): 305-308.

⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁸ This is the fundamental error behind arguments that assert that the moral status of the human being develops gradually. As one example, Michael J. Sandel has claimed that the moral status of the human embryo differs from the moral status of the human adult in the same way that the value of the acorn differs from the value of the oak tree. For discussion, see Michael J. Sandel, “Embryo Ethics: The Moral Logic of Stem Cell Research.” *N Engl J Med* 351 (2004): 207-209; and the critique by Robert P. George and Patrick Lee, “Acorns and Embryos.” *New Atlantis* No. 7, Fall 2004/Winter 2005, pp. 90-100.

having and consuming for the sake of pleasure alone. Certainly, praying about bigger purchases is wise, if one would make prudent decisions.

Some Consequences of this Moral Perspective

A discussion of prayerful consumerism may seem like a digression from ecology, but it is not. As John Paul II has insisted, at the root of the ecological problem is a moral problem, and the link to consumerism is especially strong. This insight is a challenge to see environmental issues in a new light. People tend to think about these issues only from a practical, pragmatic perspective, as though the need to be concerned about the environment exists only because of the dangers of the depletion of natural resources and the destruction of the planet. One might unconsciously feel that if there were no imminent crisis, there would be no reason for concern. However, God calls all people to be good stewards of creation whether or not an ecological crunch exists. Certainly in the Garden of Eden there was no such environmental strain, yet God called Adam and Eve to be good stewards of creation nonetheless. The way in which one manages creation reflects one's relationship with the Creator. Nothing less than one's relationship with God is at stake. The created world is the stage on which love, reverence, and a decision for God, are put into action; and a reverence for the Creator necessarily entails respect for His creation.

This moral perspective on how one handles the environment also undercuts a common practical objection. It is easy to feel that since the ecological problem is so big, the efforts of one person are negligible. Why make the effort when it will have so little effect? Yet, practical results alone should not be one's guiding principle in making moral decisions. Regardless of the overall effect or lack thereof, the way in which one deals

⁹ *Christifideles Laici: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of His Holiness John Paul II on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World* (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 1988), no. 38. Unless otherwise noted, all citations from the magisterial documents of the Catholic Church are taken from the official Vatican translations. See www.vatican.va.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, "Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences: On Evolution," October 22, 1996, no. 5. See www.vatican.va.

with creation reflects his relationship with the Creator. Mankind is to care for the environment out of reverence for God, who is honored by one's best efforts, no matter how small. All are held accountable to do their best, and good stewardship is not limited to times of ecological crisis. The one who proves faithful in small matters will be entrusted with great ones in God's kingdom. Moreover, respect for the earth yields reverence and praise of God.

A Relationship with the Creator and His Creation

Still, one might wonder how it is that the use of creation bears so much on one's relationship with God. In John Paul II's talk on peace, he notes that the integrity and order in creation is placed there by God Himself, and is an expression of His wisdom. To oppose God's wisdom is an offense against God, for it claims to know better than He does. In fact, to reject God's wisdom is to reject the very foundation of reality itself. Therefore, part of being faithful to God is to respect the order and harmony inherent in His creation. To break from this order and harmony is to break from God and to break from peace. For example, harvesting trees at a rate which allows the forest to replenish itself is in accord with the natural order of the forest, whereas to strip harvest the trees completely disrupts nature's harmony, and moves from dominion to domination. The domination of creation usually occurs in tandem with the domination of human beings. For John Paul II, the failure to respect the natural integrity and order of creation, along with the failure to respect life itself, necessarily leads to a society with no peace because of its disharmony with God and His plan.

John Paul II drew attention to the moral dimension of ecology, its root in consumerism, and finally to the natural integrity and harmony of creation. His successor, Benedict XVI, echoes many of the same themes, and he challenges the world even more to see ecology in the light of God and in the larger context of Catholic social teaching.

II. Pope Benedict XVI and Ecology's Witness to Moral Truth

Benedict XVI has had important things to say about the environment throughout his pontificate. The pope places environmental and other human concerns within the context of the larger common good of humanity, and responds to the consumerist mindset at the root of all ecological problems. In doing so, he challenges those outside the fold of the Roman Catholic Church to embrace her entire social doctrine and morality.

The Folly of the Consumerist Mindset

In his first homily as pope, Benedict XVI already indicated his concern for the environment. He lamented the fact that “the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.”¹³ The gifts of God’s creation have been used for individual’s selfish motives and the domination of others. Like John Paul II, Benedict XVI sees the root cause of the danger to the environment in what he has called “the folly of the consumerist mindset.”¹⁴ He considers consumerism folly because it is foolish to think that an accumulation of material goods will bring true happiness and wellbeing. Often those who are considered to be the most successful are the ones who are most unhappy. The lifestyles of the rich and famous often conclude with the saddest endings. Consider Michael Jackson, for instance, who made it big early on and enjoyed wealth throughout his life. According to the world, his wealth should have made him the happiest man on earth, yet, clearly, Michael was a tortured soul. The answer to happiness is not found in money or in material goods, but in God and in living an upright life of following His ways. Happiness has more to do with *being* than with *having*.

¹¹ *Declaration on Procured Abortion*, November 18, 1974, nos. 12-13.

¹² For a review of the scientific literature, see M. Zernicka-Goetz, “The first cell-fate decisions in the mouse embryo: destiny is a matter of both chance and choice.” *Curr Opin Genet Dev* 16 (2006): 406-412. For discussion, see my essay, N. Austriaco, “The Pre-implantation Embryo Revisited: Two-celled Individual or Two Individual Cells?” *Linacre Quarterly* 70 (2003): 121-126.

The Dictatorship of Consumerism and its Reduction of the Meaning of Creation

Unfortunately many have lost sight of God and have fixed their eyes on material goods as their ultimate goal. Benedict has suggested how this attitude leads to abuse of the environment. A spokesman for the pope has summarized Benedict's words from a closed-door meeting in this way: "...in a world closed in on its materialism, it is easier for the human being to make himself the dictator of all other creatures and of nature."¹⁵ When God is no longer acknowledged as the Creator and source of the meaning and harmony inherent to creation, man assumes the role of God, and, worse yet, he becomes "the dictator of all other creatures and of nature." With mankind in charge, he determines the meaning of creation. If he wants to produce oil, then the production of oil becomes the sole meaning of fossil fuels, and the full richness of creation is reduced to a dollar sign. When the consumption of the earth's natural resources is no longer considered from the perspective of the natural integrity and harmony of creation, but is regarded only as a source of revenue, then the nature of fossil fuels and the other gifts of creation are neglected in favor of fallen man's primary interest, which is his own success.

The natural order cannot be ignored as evidenced by the present state of the planet. In his most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, the pope says, "*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 is at our disposal not as 'a heap of scattered refuse,' but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order...*"¹⁶ Consumerism ignores this inbuilt order and causes God's gift of creation to be reduced to a mere means for consumption and profit.

Against consumerism, Pope Benedict places the common good at the center of the morality of environmentalism. God has destined the

¹³ For details, see the scientific review by A. Sanchez Alvarado, "Planarian regeneration: its end is its beginning," *Cell* 124 (2006): 241-245.

¹⁴ For details and citations to the scientific literature, see the review, J.G. Hall, "Twinning," *Lancet* 362 (2003): 735-743.

goods of creation for the benefit of all people. To use more than one's share is an abuse, and deprives others of their fair share. In this regard, it is interesting that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 2415) puts the issue of concern for the environment under the heading of the seventh commandment: "You shall not steal." By destroying the environment or abusing its resources, one steals from others who depend upon the environment, whether presently or in future generations. It is a matter of justice to respect and use the environment wisely, because it is a common good that must be protected for the sake of all. Yet there is more to the common good of humanity than the wise husbandry of natural resources, so it is natural for Benedict to move from speaking about an ecology of the environment to speaking about an *ecology of man*. The nature of man needs to be respected and protected in its full reality even more than tropical rain forests.

Environmental Ecology and Human Ecology

In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict returns to this theme of human ecology. He stresses the moral dimension of environmental concern, and then challenges the world to see what creation says about the human person:

In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist

¹⁵ For example, see both Germain Grisez, "When Do People Begin?" *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 63 (1989): 27-47; and Helen Watt, "The Origin of Persons," in *The Identity and Status of the Human Embryo*, Ed. Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1999), pp. 343-364.

that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others.¹⁷

Here Pope Benedict XVI draws the connection between an ecology of the environment and an ecology of man. In the created order, God not only discloses his plan for the environment, but also his plan for the human being in his full reality, in his moral and spiritual dimensions.

Finding Common Ground with the World

Benedict XVI does have a real concern for the environment as part of the good stewardship of God's gifts, but he also views ecology as an opportunity to reach those outside the Church. Pope Benedict establishes common ground with the world in order to foster an appreciation of the wisdom of all of the Catholic Church's social teaching. Benedict uncovers the moral principles which underlie concern for the environment so he can apply these very same principles to other social issues. He moves from environmental ecology to human ecology. Central to Catholic social teaching are the notions of the common good, solidarity with others, community-life and responsibility, all of which are affirmed in a concern for the environment.

Objective Reality

On an even more basic level, however, ecology shows that reality is objective. Humans do not determine the meaning of reality; rather, it is given. People do not determine the meaning of the rain forests, fossil fuels, or the ozone layer; mankind either respects what is presented by nature itself or suffers catastrophic consequences. Likewise, the rest of the created order is objective: man does not determine the meaning of

marriage, human sexuality or the life of the unborn; rather, it is for him to respect what is presented by nature itself, or suffer catastrophic consequences.

The terrible consequences of breaking from the moral order unfold slowly over time and are often subtle. With the environment, however, it is no longer possible to deny the terrible consequences that result from the moral disorder of consumerism. Environmental problems are a strong and clear witness to objective morality: going against nature results in the consequences of disorder. Once one is convinced of this truth, he can begin to see that it is also true in the other spheres of life: not only physical, but also psychological, moral, and spiritual. Some more philosophical work has to be done to expound the details of this transition from the physical to these other realms, but the witness of the environment already suggests the objectivity of all reality. This follows from the underlying unity of all reality, to which Benedict alludes: “The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. ” The environment, then, is a good starting place and a persuasive stepping-stone to acknowledging that, on all levels, morality is objective, and that the order imprinted in nature must be respected. Man does not determine what is right and wrong but can only discover it from reality itself.

The Promotion of the Common Good, Solidarity and Responsibility

Twenty years after Pope John Paul II spoke about the environment on the World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict XVI did the same. In his 2010 New Year’s Day message, the Holy Father intimates that his underlying desire in promoting environmentalism is to lead others to a deeper appreciation of the fundamental values of the entire social teaching of the Catholic Church. He challenges people to have an even nobler motivation

¹⁶ “Address to the New Ambassador to the Holy See: Republic of Korea,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 43 (October 24, 2007): 4.

for working for the environment than just saving planet earth; rather, “the real motivation must be the quest for authentic world-wide solidarity inspired by the values of charity, justice and the common good.”¹⁸ Only this more profound motivation will be able to respond to the many other moral, social, and cultural ills that the world faces.

Furthermore, in the same message, Benedict XVI reveals what he would like to see as the foundation of a program of global development, one that would be aimed not only at the environment but also the larger good of mankind: “I would advocate the adoption of a model of development based on the centrality of the human person, on the promotion and sharing of the common good, on responsibility, on a realization of our need for a changed life-style, and on prudence, the virtue which tells us what needs to be done today in view of what might happen tomorrow. ” Again, while treating environmental concerns, the pope promotes the basic principles of all the Catholic Church’s social teaching. He is concerned with creation and the human family in all its fullness.

Moreover, Vatican representatives have suggested the same thing concerning the pope’s motives in stressing ecology. First, the director of the Vatican press office, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, has said on Vatican Radio that Benedict’s approach to ecology is “a strong moral appeal to solidarity on the basis of a recognition of the universal destination of the goods of creation, which belong also to the poor and to future generations ” Ecology entails morality, especially concerning solidarity and the common good. Benedict’s approach to ecology appeals to this moral dimension and brings it to the fore of the discussion.

¹⁷ D.I. Hoffman et al., “Cryopreserved Embryos in the United States and Their Availability for Research.” *Fertility and Sterility* 79 (5): 1063-1069.

¹⁸ What then are we to do with these so-called “spare” IVF embryos? Catholic moral theologians agree that one option is to simply allow them to die in the same way that we allow terminally-ill children to die. Others suggest that these embryonic human beings could be adopted by couples who would raise them to maturity. However, there is no moral consensus among Catholic bioethicists surrounding this “embryo-adoption” option. For discussion, see Thomas V. Berg, L.C., and Edward J. Furton, *Human Embryo Adoption: Biotechnology, Marriage, and the Right to Life*. (Philadelphia: National Catholic Bioethics Center, 2006).

Second, and in a similar vein, the pope’s permanent observer to the United Nations, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, has said “Responsibility and solidarity [can be] linked here in such a way that action in favor of the environment becomes an affirmation of belief in the destiny of the human family gathered around a common project crucial to everyone’s good ” This is interesting, because, again the emphasis is on solidarity and the common good, as well as responsibility, so that efforts in ecology implicitly affirm a belief in the key foundations of Catholic social teaching. This means that even anti-Catholic environmentalists are unknowingly affirming key beliefs of Catholic social teaching. They only need help to see this and to draw out what follows from these same principles. Hidden within a concern for the environment are the more fundamental and holistic concerns of the common good, responsibility and solidarity.

Combating Individualism in Theory and in Practice

In today’s world of severe individualism it seems that many people have lost the notion of the common good and of working together with others in a common project. Yet the common good—and human solidarity and responsibility in working for this good—is central to all of the Church’s social teaching. They are the essentials to building a healthy community-life, which in turn produces a vibrant culture. From these basics one can build up “a civilization of love.” The environment, then, not only witnesses to the objective moral order, but it is also a good and persuasive stepping-stone to grasping—and owning—human solidarity, the common good, and responsibility toward using wisely all of the gifts God has given. These are at the heart of any healthy community and culture in which human beings can develop and flourish. From these basic

¹⁹ The President’s Council on Bioethics, *White Paper: Alternative Sources of Pluripotent Stem Cells* (Washington, D.C.: The President’s Council on Bioethics, 2005). Available at www.bioethics.gov/reports/white_paper/index.html.

principles, a robust body of Catholic social teaching can be developed to guide such societies into the ways of justice, peace, and happiness.

This process of embracing all of the Church's social teaching is not merely about making abstract theoretical connections. There is no such detached and unbiased appraisal of moral truth. One's life and moral character are involved in, and affected by, one's moral judgments. Moral truths are not just neutral facts that all can see regardless of how they live. Rather, the shape of one's character has a big effect on what one is able to perceive.

Therefore, a habitual neglect of others makes it more difficult to see why one should be concerned for them in the first place. When one's whole being has been oriented toward individualistic concerns, he eventually becomes blind to the value of the common good and his responsibility towards it. Preserving the environment for the sake of others, then, also loses its appeal, and mankind acts accordingly in abuse of the environment. However, the reverse is also true. If one begins to live simply and to make sacrifices so that others can enjoy their fair share of the goods of creation, he becomes more attuned to the notion of the common good. His moral vision becomes more capable of grasping what the common good demands, because the just man is already inclined to seeing the truth and goodness of justice in spheres which he has not yet considered. Acting in solidarity with others for the common good in regard to the environment, then, establishes a way of being that makes one more capable of seeing the moral truth of all of the Church's teaching. This can make a concern for the environment a great first step to embracing the full dimensions of solidarity, the common good and responsibility. Pope Benedict is encouraging others to take that first step, but he is also challenging them not to stop there.

Finding common ground through ecology is just one small aspect of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, but it is one that might have a special appeal to those who otherwise would not listen. Environmentalists, whatever their stripe, are right to find an ally in Pope Benedict XVI, and all should be challenged by him. Through his support, he encourages the

good which others are already doing. Through his witness, he challenges all to do more. By placing ecology in a larger, Catholic context, the “green pope,” Benedict XVI, has been laboring, in word and in deed, to provide a vision of the full splendor of the social teaching of the Catholic Church.

III. Concluding Reflection

To summarize: John Paul II and Benedict XVI have shown that ecological problems are, at their root, moral problems. When dominion over the rest of creation becomes domination, mankind becomes abusive towards creation and towards other people. These gifts become objects or a mere means to accomplishing selfish desires. As a result, God’s plan for creation, which He has stamped in the nature of created things, is lost.

Consumerism is one expression of dominion becoming domination, in which human persons are dominated, whether at home or in a distant country, for the sake of the pleasure of another. An examination of conscience can help guard against this pitfall: Are purchasing decisions oriented towards an upright character and becoming a fuller human being, or are they aimed at obtaining more possessions and pleasures in life? If being and moral uprightness are the emphasis, God’s plan for creation and His plan for all aspects of human life are revealed. If not, and if having is the emphasis, then the futility of consumerism is all that remains, existing ecological problems grow and it becomes more difficult to experience God. For, as the spiritual writers have said, a simpler way of life improves spiritual vision and the awareness of God.

A Catholic view of ecology, then, entails a deep moral transformation that acknowledges and heeds the full dignity of the human being and the rest of God’s creation. It promotes action on behalf of the

²⁰ For a summary and commentary on the ANT debate among Catholic ethicists and moral theologians, see J. Thomas Petri, O.P., “Altered Nuclear Transfer, Gift, and Mystery: An Aristotelian-Thomistic Response to David L. Schindler.” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 7 (2007): 729-747.

environment, in solidarity with others, and challenges mankind, above all, to act on behalf of the human being in his full reality, as made in the image of God. In the Church's dialogue with the world, an environmental ecology transitions into a human ecology, which, in the full Catholic context, entails all of the Church's social teaching. To see how Catholic social doctrine is to be embodied, then, one must turn to those close friends of God, the saints.

The Ecological Witness of the Saints

The medieval Dominican, St. Albert the Great, is the patron saint of scientists. His room was famous for being full of minerals, chemicals and specimens, for he was devoted to discovering what God's creation had to say about itself. He was known to strap on his big black boots and tromp through the woods collecting specimens of wildlife for his study. St. Albert explains "At one time when I was away from home I wandered far and wide to places where metals were to be found that I might discover their nature and properties. This is the best kind of inquiry and the most certain " Albert was open to what nature had to say about itself. He used scientific rigor to discover truth about the natural world, and he respected the integrity and natural harmony of the created world. This, in turn, helped him in his relationship with the Creator. His critical and systematic study of nature brought him to this conclusion: "natural science teaches us to experience, among things, the Creator of creatures."

For a second example there is the Carmelite, Brother Lawrence, the 16th century author of *The Practice of the Presence of God*. His conversion came through reflecting upon creation. At age 18 he looked upon a tree in the dead of winter; it had no leaves. Yet, he reflected that

²¹ K. Takahashi et al., "Induction of Pluripotent Stem Cells from Adult Human Fibroblasts by Defined Factors." *Cell* 131 (2007): 861-872; and J. Yu et al., "Induced Pluripotent Stem Cell Lines Derived from Human Somatic Cells." *Science* 318 (2007): 1917-1920.

²² J. Hanna et al., "Treatment of Sickle Cell Anemia Mouse Model with iPS Cells Generated from Autologous Skin." *Science* 318 (2007): 1920-1923.

in the springtime, the leaves would return and the tree would be refreshed and bear flowers and fruit. What is not, comes to exist, and comes to exist so beautifully. Lawrence grasped that God was the cause of it all. His biographer notes that he never got over this new awakening to God's presence. Br. Lawrence's simple, yet profound, reflection on the rhythm of nature allowed him to perceive the full reality of creation, and it brought him to his knees in adoration of the Creator. The wonders of creation are not something to be taken for granted, but should move all to worship God.

Both the scientific reflection of St. Albert and the more mystical ponderings of Br. Lawrence exemplify important aspects of viewing ecology in the light of God: one must apply reason and a contemplative gaze in order to discover God through His creation. Good stewardship demands preservation of the environment, but one must not neglect the moral and spiritual dimensions. May the example of the "green popes" and the unified witness of Catholic action and teaching demonstrate to the world a way of life which leads to peaceful harmony with the cosmos, with one's neighbor and with God.

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Father Austriaco completed his Bachelor's of Science Degree in Bioengineering at the University of Pennsylvania, and then earned his Ph.D. in Biology from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.), where he was a fellow of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. In 1997, following a deeper conversion to the Lord, Father Austriaco entered the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans). He was ordained a priest in May of 2004, and completed his Pontifical License in Sacred Theology (S.T.L.) at the Dominican House of Studies in Washington, DC the following year, for a thesis in moral theology entitled, *Life and Death from the Systems Perspective: A Thomistic Bioethics for a Post-Genomic Age*.

¹ F. Soldner et al., "Parkinson's disease patient-derived induced pluripotent stem cells free of viral reprogramming factors," *Cell* 136 (2009): 964-977.

² J.B. Kim et al., "Direct reprogramming of human neural stem cells by OCT4," *Nature* 461 (2009): 649-653.

³ A. Raya et al., "A protocol describing the genetic correction of somatic human cells and subsequent generation of iPS cells," *Nat Protoco.* 5 (2010): 647-660.

⁴ Martin Fackler, "Shinya Yamanaka: Risk Taking is in His Genes," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2007

