

## For Benedict, environmental movement promises recovery of natural law tradition

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 27, 2007 All Things Catholic

One could say that summer 2007 is when the Vatican decided to go green. First came an announcement in June that more than 1,000 photovoltaic panels will be installed atop the Paul VI Audience Hall, allowing the building to utilize solar energy for light, heating and cooling. A month later, the Vatican became the first state in Europe to go completely carbon-neutral, signing an agreement with a Hungarian firm to reforest a sufficiently large swath of Hungary's Bükk National Park to offset its annual CO2 emissions.

To some, these may seem curiously cutting edge moves from a pope whose recent decisions to revive the pre-Vatican II Mass and to reaffirm claims that Catholicism is the lone true church have cemented his reputation as the ultimate "retro" figure. He sometimes brings to mind the famous quip that rolling back the clock is a perfectly reasonable thing to do if it's keeping bad time.

So what gives?

This week, we got the outlines of an answer from the pope himself, during a July 24 conversation with priests from the northern Italian dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso. (Such encounters have become an annual ritual as part of the pope's summer vacation.)

The first question had to do with the formation of conscience, and Benedict replied with his now-familiar diagnosis of the cultural situation in the West. By truncating the sphere of reason to only those things which can be empirically verified or falsified, the pope said, spirituality and morality have been "expelled" from rationality, consigned to a merely subjective sphere, understood as a matter of individual taste and judgment.

In response, Benedict proposed a two-pronged strategy, one being the path of religious faith, the other being what he called "a secular path." By that, Benedict appeared to mean natural law, the idea that nature itself carries a moral message that can be deciphered utilizing the faculty of conscience, even by those who aren't Christian or who aren't religious at all.

In the pope's mind, this seems to be where environmentalism enters the picture.

"Everyone can see today that humanity could destroy the foundation of its own existence, its earth, and therefore we can't simply do whatever we want with this earth that has been entrusted to us, what seems to us in a given moment useful or promising, but we have to respect the inner laws of creation, of this earth, we have to learn these laws and obey them if we want to survive," Benedict said. "This obedience to the voice of the earth is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, the desires of the moment. ? Existence itself, our earth, speaks to us, and we have to learn to listen."

From there, Benedict said, we may also learn anew to listen to the voice of human nature as well, discovering in other people and in human communities moral laws that stand above our own ego. In that regard, the pope said, we can draw upon the great moral experience of humanity. Doing so teaches that human liberty never exists in isolation from others; it works only if it's rooted in a sense of common values.

In other words, Benedict sees in the modern environmental movement the most promising route for recovery of the natural law tradition. What today's rising ecological awareness presumes is that there are limits inscribed in nature beyond which humanity trespasses at its own peril. Without any particular reference to religion, the secular world today is arriving at its own version of natural law theory. Building upon that momentum, and directing it beyond environmental matters to questions of individual and social morality, is what Benedict seems to mean by a "secular path" to formation of conscience.

To extend a metaphor, one might say that Benedict XVI is trying to paint a distinctively Catholic shade of green.

I don't mean to suggest that the pope's environmental concern is entirely instrumental, as if he OKed putting solar cells on Vatican buildings simply because, in some round-about fashion, he thinks that'll convince people not to have abortions. He's made clear on multiple occasions that he regards defense of the environment as an urgent moral necessity all by itself. But Benedict also appears to see something deeper stirring in Western environmentalism, a new sense of moral restraint grounded in objective natural reality.

To put the pope's point simplistically, if the world is willing to limit its carbon output on the basis of the laws of nature, then maybe it will become more willing to accept limits arising from nature in other spheres of life as well.

At the moment, the International Theological Commission, the main advisory body to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, has a sub-commission working on a document on Natural Law. A draft is expected to be ready for discussion in October. The project is being led by Dominican Fr. Serge Bonino, the editor of the *Revue Thomist*; the American member is Jesuit Fr. John Michael McDermott of the Pontifical College Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio. It will be interesting to see if the sub-commission develops this line of reflection.

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Two other points are worth picking up from that July 24 session.

First, for the last couple of years a series of somewhat confusing statements from senior Catholic officials have created doubt as to whether the Catholic church accepts the theory of evolution. Benedict addressed the subject again on Wednesday. Here's what he said, on the subject of trying to find a source of meaning in the context of modern culture.

"Presently I see in Germany, and also in the United States, a fairly bitter debate between so-called creationism and evolutionism, presented as if they were mutually exclusive alternatives: whoever believes in a Creator cannot believe in evolution, and likewise whoever believes in evolution has to exclude God," Benedict said. "This opposition is an absurdity, because on the one hand, there are many scientific proofs in favor of an evolution that seems to be a reality that we have to see, and that enriches our understanding of life and of existence as such. But the doctrine of evolution does not respond to all questions, above all to the great philosophical questions: Where does everything come from? How did everything start on the path that finally arrived at humanity?"

One news agency reported that Benedict's comments "appear to be an endorsement of the doctrine of intelligent design," but that doesn't seem quite right. Intelligent design theorists question evolution on scientific grounds, arguing that it can't explain gaps in the fossil record or the "irreducible complexity" of organic life. When Benedict said that evolution doesn't answer all questions, he meant that it doesn't address deep philosophical matters such as the origin and meaning of life. If anything, his comments should be read as an endorsement of evolution, not of intelligent design, understood as a scientific hypothesis rather than a philosophical system.

To put this into a sound-bite, Benedict believes in both evolution and creation, each understood on its own terms. Speaking later in the session on a different topic, Benedict XVI said that this passion for synthesis is the spirit of Catholicism, always seeking both/and solutions.

The last question came from a priest who described himself as a member of the Vatican II generation. He said many priests of his era are feeling tired and disheartened; they began, he said, with great dreams of changing the world, many of which have not been realized. What message, he asked, does the pope have for them?

Benedict began by describing Vatican II as a *magna carta* for the future of the church, which remains "very essential and fundamental." He also noted that historically, councils are always followed by turbulence. St. Basil, he recalled, compared the situation following the Council of Nicea to a naval battle at night, when nobody can recognize who's who and so the fight becomes all against all. St. Gregory Nazianzen, he said, actually refused to participate in the First Council of Constantinople for precisely this reason.

Benedict argued that the post-conciliar period was framed by two great historical turning points. The first was the explosion of revolutionary energies in 1968, which the pope said triggered a cultural crisis. The "new, sane modernity" envisioned by the council found itself facing a Marxist-inspired violent break with the past. Some Catholics, he said, read the council as a warrant for cultural revolution, while others rejected the council for the same reason. Then came 1989 and the implosion of Marxist utopian dreams, which left skepticism and nihilism in its wake. In that context, he said, "the timid, humble search to realize the true spirit of the council" was often overwhelmed.

Yet, Benedict said, while falling trees make noise, growing ones are silent. In just that fashion, he said, it's possible today to see new growth resulting from the council. He pointed to Brazil, saying that when he went in May he knew about the explosion in non-Catholic religious movements in the country, but what he didn't understand was the growth taking place inside Catholicism. He said that almost every day in Brazil, a new religious order or lay movement is born. That growth is not enough to "refill the statistics," he said, but he called that a "false hope," adding that "statistics are not our divinity."

Despite the vicissitudes of recent history, Benedict argued, Vatican II provided "a great roadmap," allowing the church to move forward "joyously and full of hope."

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