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Church's teaching on ecology still light green

by Sean McDonagh

Eco Catholic
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In my 1990 book, *The Greening of the Church*, I argued that concern for God's creation was low on the list of Catholic priorities. In the intervening years, concerns for the planet have increased at the level of papal teaching and in local churches. The most notable documents are: "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation" (1990), Chapter 10 of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (2004), *Caritas in Veritate* (July 2009), "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation" (2010) and Pope Benedict XVI's address to the Vatican diplomatic corps Jan. 11, 2010.

Even so, the gains have been minimal enough that I disagree with those who claim that the Catholic church began to take environmental problems seriously during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Take for instance the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. The weakest chapter is number 10, devoted to "Safeguarding the Environment." The most serious problem facing planet Earth today, and therefore humanity, is the wanton destruction of biodiversity. We are living through the sixth largest extinction of life since life began on Earth 3.8 billion years ago. Through the destruction of land, sea and air habitats, humans could wipe out between one-third and one-half of all the species on the planet within this century. Yet the rampant destruction of biodiversity only merits one paragraph -- this from a church that claims to be pro-life!

Similarly, we are now more aware that extreme weather events such as Hurricane Sandy, which devastated Haiti, New Jersey and New York in October, and Typhoon Bopha, which killed or left missing almost 2,000 people on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines in early December, are at least in part a result of climate change. Yet, to date the average rise in global temperature has only been 0.8 degree

Celsius above pre-industrial times. Even the failed Copenhagen Accord in December 2009 warned that if the average global temperature rose more than 2 degrees Celsius, it would lead to "dangerous anthropogenic interference."

Figures released from the Global Carbon Project in December 2012 show that global emissions have been increasing at an average of 3 percent per annum since 2000. Kevin Anderson of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change in Norwich, England, says that keeping global warming below "2 degrees C is beyond our grasp and 4 degrees C is challenging" without seriously curbing greenhouse gas emissions. "Each year you don't do anything the challenge grows greater," he adds.

A rise of 4 degrees Celsius would transform the species-rich tropical forest in the Amazon into savanna within a century. Many currently habited areas of the planet would become uninhabitable. These are not the rantings of delusional prophets, but are based on sophisticated computer modeling and yet action on climate change is not at the top of political or religious agendas. The compendium devotes a single paragraph to climate change.

At a practical level, Benedict had photovoltaic cells installed at the Vatican. In 2011, he was given an electric car with a 44-kilowatt electric motor and lithium-ion battery. While I welcome the initiatives, they are not earth-shattering.

In "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation," John Paul II wrote: "Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it *takes a serious look at its life style*. ? 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." Even so, Catholic teaching on ecology is still in its infancy for the following reasons.

First, none of the above documents gives any overall sense of the magnitude of the current ecological crisis. Without an accurate appraisal of the true magnitude of the Earth's ecological challenges, one cannot claim to understand the current ecological crisis. Unless one understands the magnitude of a problem, one cannot design appropriate responses. So, despite an increased sprinkling of ecological language and concerns in addresses and documents from the Holy See, these still lack an accurate analysis of the problem.

Second, in reading these documents, one gets no sense of urgency. The consequence of climate change could be catastrophic for hundreds of millions of people. Catholic leadership has not added its moral voice to this urgency. No senior church leader has challenged Sydney Cardinal George Pell, who continues to promote a "climate skeptic" perspective, not just in Australia, but across the globe.

Third, ecology is a science based on empirical data about what is happening in particular ecosystems and the biosphere as a whole. Despite the data-focused nature of ecology, none of the above documents bases its ecological reflections on scientific data. The drafters of these documents have available to them competent scientific data from reputable sources, such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or the U.N. Convention on Biodiversity, yet no reference to these credible scientific authorities are in the documents.

Papal teaching on ecology is almost exclusively homocentric. Right throughout the recent papal teaching on ecology we find a very strange and confusing notion called "human ecology." *Caritas in Veritate* states "when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits." I presume that what the pope is saying is that societies that respect human beings, especially the most vulnerable -- the

unborn, the young and the elderly -- will also be more inclined to respect the environment. But does one have to invert the scientific categories of the Linnaean taxonomy to make this point?

This notion of "human ecology" seems totally at odds with what we know from the various sciences, which is that the Earth is 4.6 billion years old and that life on Earth is about 3.8 billion years old. There were fully functioning ecosystems in the Lower Carboniferous period from 324 million to 354 million years ago. At that time there were no flowering plants or birds, but there were giant horsetails and ferns and an array of creatures, most of which are now extinct. In religious terms, I am sure that God would have spoken the Genesis words, "It is good," over this and other phases of the evolution of life on Earth. God would not be waiting for *Homo sapiens* to arrive about 200,000 years ago to give meaning to creation.

It is important theologically to remember that God has a history with nature that is independent of God's relationship with humanity.

In an otherwise positive review of *Caritas in Veritate*, Irish theologian Kiltegan Fr. Donal Dorr writes, "The whole encyclical is written from within an older anthropocentric paradigm, the ecological issues are treated almost entirely in terms of present-day human concerns. What is needed today, however, is a kind of Copernican revolution leading to a major paradigm shift. We need to locate all our human concerns -- and especially our approach to economics -- within the far wider context of an ecological and cosmic vision."

One thing I have learned during my 30 years promoting ecological awareness is that, in official church circles or at church-sponsored conferences, one cannot raise the issues of the impact of human population levels on other species or on the planet.

I explored the population issue in *The Greening of the Church*, pointing out that the Earth's carrying capacity for different levels of population was not addressed in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. Little was known about climate change, the massive extinction of species and the destruction of the oceans in the late 1960s. Today, when measuring tools like the human ecological footprint are available both in bioregions and globally, there is an urgent need for the next pope to have the courage to revisit the population issue.

I hasten to add that a fall in population levels will not, of itself, reduce the stress on the planet unless it is accompanied by a drop in our consumption patterns. Nevertheless, it is time for the Catholic church to revisit its teaching on birth control. Teaching that each act of sexual intercourse must be open to life leads, as it inevitably must, to larger families; the subsequent increased stress on the biosphere could trigger a major collapse of global ecosystems within this century. Such a breakdown, especially in food production, would lead to a dramatic fall in human population levels that could well be permanent because the damage to the earth's fertility could be irreversible.

One of the most effective ways for the next pope to give leadership in the area of protecting the planet would be to call a synod for creation. Each local church could reflect on creation in its own area and see how Christians could give leadership in moving toward a more sane and sustainable world. In preparing for such a synod, everyone in the church -- young, old, farmers, industrial workers, bankers, scientists, fishers, theologians, contemplatives, religious, teachers, doctors, liturgists, artists, poets and writers -- would be able to share their insights and wisdom. This would give a great impetus to the tasks of caring for the Earth that cares for every creature. I believe it would also give new life and focus to the Catholic faith in our contemporary society.

[Fr. Seán McDonagh is an Irish Columban missionary priest who worked for more than two decades in the Philippines. Currently, he is the Columban researcher for the group's Justice, Peace & Integrity of Creation and gives seminars around the Columban world on those issues.]

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