NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

# The 'greening' of institutional Christianity

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 15, 2006 All Things Catholic

**W**hen Pope Benedict XVI and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople met recently, the encounter was spun in a variety of ways: As an effort to reunite Eastern and Western Christianity; As an attempt to forge a united Christian front vis-à-vis Islam; Even as a bid to pool resources to combat runaway secularism in Europe.

What the meeting was not generally seen as -- though it easily could have been -- was an encounter between two outspoken environmentalists, struggling to stir the conscience of the world about a mounting ecological crisis.

While environmentalism has long been a cause more associated with the secular left, the increasingly intense engagement of both the patriarch and the pope, who cannot by any stretch of the imagination be seen as avant garde figures, suggests a broad "greening" of institutional Christianity.

Bartholomew I has become known as "the Green Patriarch" for his environmental leadership. More than a decade ago, Bartholomew first announced on an island in the Aegean Sea that pollution and other attacks on the environment should be considered sins.

In a widely-quoted Venice address in 2002, Bartholomew I urged Christians "to act as priests of creation in order to reverse the descending spiral of ecological degradation." Towards that end, he did not mince words.

"We are to practice a voluntary self-limitation in our consumption of food and natural resources," Bartholomew said bluntly. "Each of us is called to make the crucial distinction between what we want and what we need. Only through such self-denial, through our willingness sometimes to forgo and to say, 'no' or 'enough,' will we rediscover our true human place in the universe."

Less noticed, but arguably even more consequential in the long run, is the fashion in which Benedict XVI has likewise been finding his voice.

In July, Benedict sent a message to Bartholomew, in which the pope urged a new awareness of "the intrinsic link between development, human needs and the safeguarding of creation."

During a Sunday Angelus address last August, ahead of the Catholic church's "Defense of Creation" day, the pope's rhetoric became even sharper. Slamming problems such as smog, pollution, deforestation and the

greenhouse effect, Benedict said such environmental degradation is unsustainable, and takes a special toll on "the poor of the earth."

"In dialogue with Christians of different denominations, we should commit ourselves to taking care of creation, without depleting its resources and sharing them in solidarity," the pope said.

Picking up the new tone, *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican newspaper, carried an editorial which asserted that ecological crises pose "a bigger global threat than terrorism."

"Unless effective action is taken, the Earth will inexorably head towards death," *L'Osservatore* warned, adding that "thousands of people are already dying each day" because of environmental problems such as unhygienic living conditions and a widespread lack of drinking water.

Just this week, the Vatican released Benedict XVI's message for the World Day of Peace, marked each year on Jan. 1. Environmental concerns figured prominently.

"Humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology," Benedict wrote. "Experience shows that disregard for the environment always harms human coexistence, and vice versa."

Benedict went on to warn that "the destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth's resources cause grievances, conflicts and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development."

Benedict pointed to growing tensions surrounding energy supplies, worrying that without an equitable solution, developing nations will be even more tempted to overtax their natural resources.

Given this growing convergence between pope and patriarch, it's no surprise that the two men addressed environmental concerns in their Nov. 30 Common Declaration in Istanbul.

"In the face of the great threats to the natural environment, we want to express our concern at the negative consequences for humanity and for the whole of creation which can result from economic and technological progress that does not know its limits," Benedict and Bartholomew said.

"As religious leaders, we consider it one of our duties to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God's creation, and to bequeath to future generations a world in which they will be able to live."

Of course, neither man arrived at these convictions *ex nihilo* they build upon the teachings of their predecessors and traditions with deep roots in their churches, which in turn reflect the clear Biblical mandate to be good stewards of creation.

Yet not so long ago, Christian theologians and ministers working on ecological issues were looked upon with a certain suspicion. People worried, on the one hand, about a creeping divinization of nature (think Teilhard de Chardin), on the other about a denial of the unique status of the human person in the order of creation (think Peter Singer). More generally, there was a cultural gap between the Birkenstocks-wearing, anarchy-inclined ethos of the environmental movement, and anything that passed for conventional Christianity.

Today, things are different, with senior churchmen openly speaking the language of environmental activism. At the 2005 Synod of Bishops in Rome, for example, the link between the Eucharist and ecological concern surfaced with surprising frequency.

"Climactic change presents a serious threat to world peace. It is an authentic 'sign of the times' that demands of us an 'ecological conversion,'" said Archbishop Pedro Ricardo Barreto Jimeno of Huancayo, Peru, on Oct. 4.

"As 'fruit of the earth', the bread and the wine represent the creation which is entrusted to us by our Creator," Barreto Jimeno said. "In Huancayo, the air, the ground and the basin of the river Mantaro are seriously affected by contamination. The Eucharist commits us to working so that the bread and wine be fruit of 'a fertile, pure and uncontaminated land.'"

Bishop Gabriel Peñate Rodr'guez, apostolic vicar of Izabal in Guatemala, invoked precisely the same image.

"Guatemala is a country menaced by mineral exploitation," Peñate Rodr'guez said. "We also hope that the bread that is converted in the body of the Lord and the wine which is converted into his blood may be fruit of a fertile, pure and uncontaminated land."

The leadership of Benedict and Bartholomew, who guide the world's 1.1 billion Roman Catholics and 250 million Orthodox, suggests in the clearest possible fashion that such environmental awareness has entered the Christian mainstream. To employ an ecological metaphor, the question now is whether such ideas will trickle down to the grass-roots, mobilizing a potentially vast corps of spiritually motivated activists to change the global calculus.

If so, Bartholomew and Benedict may well wind up as catalysts in a Christian version of the "Green Revolution."

*The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is* **jallen@ncronline.org[1]**

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *01/22/2017 - 23:45*):** https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/greening-institutional-christianity

**Links:**
[1] mailto:jallen@ncronline.org