

Ecology makes the Catholic mega-trend list

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 2, 2007 All Things Catholic

Perhaps the week in which Al Gore turned green into gold by winning an Oscar for "An Inconvenient Truth" offers an appropriate moment to say that I've finally been persuaded to include "Ecology and Natural Resources" in my list of the top ten "Mega-Trends" shaping global Catholicism.

The original plan for my forthcoming book, which I rolled out in columns in December (See Dec. 22, [Ten mega-trends shaping the Catholic church](#) [1], and Dec. 29, [The top five 'missing mega-trends' shaping Catholicism](#) [2]), was to treat environmental concerns under the broader rubric of globalization. It's worth recalling that the idea is to identify those forces which today *really are* most important in shaping the church's future, not those which *should be* most important.

At that level, I was already aware of several good arguments in favor of singling out the environment, including: 1) a growing "green streak" in official church teaching, including John Paul II's 2001 call for "ecological conversion"; 2) mounting scientific data about the seriousness of environmental threats; 3) the likelihood that water shortages may prove among the most geopolitically destabilizing forces in the 21st century; 4) the prospect that liberal Catholic energies increasingly will be diverted away from efforts to reform the structures or teachings of the church, which will bear little fruit in a period of strong emphasis on Catholic identity, towards *ad extra* matters such as environmental justice.

But I hesitated, in part because I didn't yet see evidence of systematic Catholic activism or official leadership on the environment on a scale that bears comparison with the energies coursing today around Islam, or bioethics. One could make a better case for the environment as a mega-trend in Orthodoxy, it seemed to me, given the way Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople has thrown himself into the cause, including highly publicized boat trips with the media down rivers in Europe and South America. For his efforts, Bartholomew has been dubbed the "Green Patriarch." It's hard to find an analog on the Catholic side.

I spoke this week with Walt Grazer, who manages the Environmental Justice Program for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and who conceded that the questions raised by Islam and bioethics have an immediacy for Catholics that environmental debates sometimes lack. He also candidly acknowledged that he doesn't yet see the front-burner concern among the U.S. bishops on the environment that other issues often elicit. (That notwithstanding, Grazer strongly believes the "greening" of the church is a mega-trend; more on that in a moment.)

Moreover, I was impressed by a couple of obvious "natural limits" to the extent to which Catholicism is every likely to embrace the modern environmental movement.

One is philosophical and theological. Some environmental gurus soften the distinction between humanity and nature to an extent that can be difficult to reconcile with Christian orthodoxy; controversies surrounding the former Dominican Matthew Fox's "Creation Spirituality," for example, illustrate that problem.

The other natural limit is political. It's a fact of life that many secular environmentalists embrace positions on other issues, such as population control, that are at odds with Catholic teaching. This has not escaped the attention of Catholic critics of the "greens."

To take one example, Italian journalist Antonio Gaspari, who directs a master's program in environmental sciences at the Legionaries of Christ-sponsored Regina Apostolorum in Rome, has co-authored a two-volume work called *The Lies of the Environmentalists*. Its basic argument is that things are much better than commonly described by environmental alarmists, and that their "catastrophism" serves as a smokescreen for radical philosophical notions such as those propounded by the utilitarian philosopher and animal rights activist Peter Singer.

In the United States, a body called the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship put out its "Cornwall Declaration" in 1999, following a meeting in West Cornwall, Conn. Catholic signatories included Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, Robert Royal, Fr. Robert Sirico, and Fr. J. Michael Beers. Though affirming the legitimacy of environmental concern, the statement flagged several core issues for environmentalists, including global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss, as "unfounded or undue concerns." More broadly, it warned of setting economic development in opposition to good stewardship, describing that as a false dichotomy which would, in their view, keep the poor in misery.

Just as one more illustration, on Feb. 18, Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, published a column in the Australian *Sunday Telegraph* arguing that on matters of climate change, "some zealots have been presenting extreme scenarios to frighten us," and that "the science is more complicated than the propaganda." Pell cites a laundry-list of data suggesting that the evidence for global warming is not clear-cut, or that its dangers have been exaggerated. Pell does not link this to any broader political agenda, but he leaves little doubt that he's not persuaded of environmentalism as a "mega-trend."

Since Gaspari, Neuhaus and Pell represent important constituencies within Catholicism, it's not unreasonable to be wary about how far the church may go down this road.

Then why elevate ecology as a "mega-trend"? What put it over the top for me is not so much anything happening in church circles, but rather recent developments in American secular politics.

On Feb. 13, Sen. John McCain co-authored an op/ed piece in *The Boston Globe* with Senator Joseph Lieberman. The two men wrote: "There is now a broad consensus in this country, and indeed in the world, that global warming is happening, that it is a serious problem, and that humans are causing it. The recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ... puts the final nail in denial's coffin about the problem of global warming."

One day before, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani appeared at a press conference in Simi Valley, Calif., where reporters asked him about "An Inconvenient Truth." His surprising response was that he didn't care for the movie -- not because it went too far, but because it didn't go far enough.

"I do believe there is global warming," Giuliani said. "The overwhelming majority of scientists believe there's significant human cause that's making it more difficult, making it worse."

In that regard, Giuliani said, Gore's movie should have spent more time treating potential solutions, such as carbon sequestration, the use of "clean coal," and ethanol. The reason it didn't, Giuliani implied, is because those steps are opposed by "special interests" such as the oil industry.

"I didn't detect the same zeal to take on those special interests as in explaining the problem," he said of the Gore movie.

Given that any Democrat who might win in 2008 is likely to pursue a much more ambitious environmental program than the Bush administration, these declarations from the leading Republicans make it almost a near-certainty that 2008 will mark a transition in American policy. Since the United States is the leading producer of greenhouse gases, and since its policies, for better or worse, often set the global tone, this means that the world is likely poised for a new period of political activism.

What this implies, it seems to me, is that today's ecological sensitivity within Catholicism, however nascent it remains, will soon encounter a political climate which encourages its rapid development. It's one thing to work on issues with no meaningful possibility of doing anything about them in the broader culture, but when a strong political wave crests, it stimulates even inchoate movements to go "mass market." That was the case with Catholic anti-nuclear activism in the early 1980s, for example, which was energized by the "nuclear freeze" movement, and which influenced, among other things, the 1983 pastoral letter of the U.S. bishops, "The Challenge of Peace."

In a 1983 lecture at Fordham University, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin acknowledged that part of the groundwork for the pastoral had been laid by a "new moment" in American political debate, in which nuclear policy was "open to reassessment and redirection." The bishops, Bernardin said, both helped to shape that "new moment," and had been in turn influenced by it.

Grazer told me that he sees much the same landscape today on ecological questions.

"When I started doing this in 1993, I was pretty lonely," he recalled, referring to the launch of the Environmental Justice Program at the USCCB. "No one else worldwide seemed to be doing this stuff. I knew pretty much everything that was going on."

Today, Grazer said, Catholic activism on environmental issues has grown to such an extent -- at the diocesan and parish levels and especially within religious orders -- that he simply can't keep track of it all. He pointed to

efforts among women's congregations, for example, to "green" their facilities. At the official level, he cited a recent environmental network developed by the church in New Jersey, a pastoral letter on emissions from the bishops of New York, and another pastoral from bishops in the Northwest on the Columbia River.

I happened to talk to Grazer the morning after he had addressed a crowd of 250 young people at the University of Notre Dame. He said that he finds a special zeal for the environment among the young, and not just among the usual liberal activist suspects. At the bishops' conference, Grazer also works on relations with Evangelical Christians, and told me he's been surprised at how ecologically-minded conservative Evangelical youth often are.

In part, Grazer said, this activism is being driven by the changing political climate. He called it a "moment of evangelization."

Grazer is hardly blind to the fact that some sectors of the environmental movement operate out of a worldview alien to Catholic thought, if not actively hostile to it. For him, however, that's all the more reason to work alongside them.

"We have to be in this debate," he said, "because if we're not, somebody else is going to define it. We have to have our oar in the water."

Grazer said he believes common cause is possible, at least on specific issues such as combating greenhouse gases. The key, he said, is to "chunk things down," putting broader philosophical disagreements to the side.

Grazer also said he's aware some constituencies within the church may resist that "chunking down," especially when it comes to choices that seem to pit environmental protection against economic development. But he's convinced that "historical forces" as well as the "physical reality of the world" mean that "the train has already left the station."

Whether Grazer's optimism is entirely on the mark remains to be seen, but the stars do seem aligned for a "boom cycle" for the church's green wing, and that by itself probably adds up to a mega-trend.

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