

A man for all seasons: Pope Francis and the environment

By Celia Deane-Drummond

That the first encyclical of Pope Francis, following his "Light of Faith" appearing immediately after his inauguration in 2013, will be dedicated to environmental issues represents a remarkable convergence with the renowned green Eastern Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I.

Creation care is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be a Christian - even in a traditional, orthodox sense.

This raises the question: How new is this strand in Catholic social thought? Is this a theological shift or not?

Certainly, in as much as the emphasis of Pope Francis's predecessor was a preoccupation with the moral and structural ills of modernity and the temptations of relativism. Francis, instead, will carve out something that is distinctive and characteristic of his vocational identity in alignment with that great patron saint of ecology, Saint Francis of Assisi.

But Francis is not by any means reinventing the wheel and will be very careful to show the sources of this theological emphasis. It is like, if you will, a light that has been hidden under a bushel and now at last can be put in a prominent place. This light is one that will shine brightly in a world groaning under the weight of sin in all its ramifications - including ecological destruction and climate change.

The persona of Francis himself is also significant, for he walks the walk as well as talks the talk by showing through his daily actions what it means to display those great theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These virtues, combined with a real humility towards others, bring an authenticity to his message that is hard to resist. He is, as it were, like Pope (now Saint) John Paul II once was, perhaps a saint in the making.

One of his consistent practices is to remind his listeners that creation care, alongside solidarity with those that are poor and peace-making, are the three fundamental aspects of his ministry. The depth of his philosophical analysis might be faulted, but no one can doubt his sincerity. And if this costs him some popularity among his fellow cardinals or others, then we can be sure that he will be prepared to go to the block.

The love of creation

For Catholics who have been used to beating themselves in shame for their failures to respond properly to humanitarian causes all over the world, adding yet another moral obligation might seem too much to bear. It is enough, then, for them to think about immediate family responsibilities, bringing up children in a way that is free from the contaminations of worldly desires and pleasures without adding difficult moral demands on creation care. But what Francis will certainly do is show that the traditional emphasis on the family in Catholic social thought is not incompatible with an emphasis on creation care - in fact, the two are premised on each other.

The basis for this claim is theological, and reaches back to truths behind the story of the very first family in the book of Genesis. In this story, the first human pair are given the designation *imago Dei*, the image of God, and are asked to "till and keep the garden." Image bearing goes with a particular responsibility to have dominion over the earth. Here, proper dominion over the earth and procreation go hand in hand, rather than remain separated.

But, theologically speaking, we can take this further. This would involve laying bare what Benedict XVI called "the grammar of creation," or what John Paul II described in [Centesimus Annus](#) as the ontological and moral law built into creation as such. Where does this law itself come from?

In his first encyclical, [Redemptor Hominis](#), John Paul II provides the answer. In a crucial passage (par. 8) he claims: "In Jesus Christ, the visible world which God created for man-the world that, when sin entered, 'was subject to futility'; recovers again its original link with the divine source of Wisdom and Love." Wisdom, then, is the ontological law of creation that is broken by sin, but restored in Jesus Christ. This is a Christology of cosmic proportions, not just limited to the human sphere alone. And it may be one reason why John Paul II's encyclical on the Spirit in the Church, [Dominum et Vivificantem](#) (par. 50) makes precisely this point:

"The 'first born of all creation', becoming incarnate in the individual humanity of Christ, unites himself in some way with the entire reality of man, which is also 'flesh' - and in this reality with all 'flesh', with the whole of creation."

It is Jesus Christ, then, who provides a pattern for right creaturely relationships, and God's affirmation of the natural world becomes evident through the incarnation - God becoming human, material reality.

But those relationships are now distorted and broken, including a broken and fragmented community with others and the natural world. The whole of creation, according to Romans 8:22, groans - a passage that finds its way into *Redemptor Hominis*. If that groaning was the last word, there would be reason for despair. But as Pope Francis has already indicated in [*Evangelii Gaudium*](#), the message of Christianity is fundamentally a hope-filled one based on the power of the resurrection. So, God will restore all creation through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Can this message of hope and joy still make sense in the context of climate change, ecological devastation and numerous and compounding social injustices? Pope Francis will insist that it can, that the last word for Christians has to be one of faith in the providential care of God alongside ultimate hope in the power of the resurrection and restoration of all things.

There are, of course, some intermediate steps along the way between the eschatological future and the real difficulties that we find in the present. These steps represent our particular human responsibilities and how to act in the world.

Ecological conversion

The language of *ecological conversion* was used by John Paul II on a number of occasions, initially to refer to a general turn to ecology, but subsequently in identification with a commitment to Christ. As I indicated above, there is no distinction in his mind between the two - for Christ is the grammar of creation and sets the shape of the moral law.

Human ecology is another term that John Paul II uses that also provides a linking between different domains, showing how connected our human sphere is to the

ecological spheres in which we find ourselves. So to split apart the human from the ecological does not make sense, either from a scientific or theological perspective.

In this respect, it is remarkable that the humanistic intent of Catholic social thought has become so narrowly focused on human rights to the expense of other concerns, instead of viewing human flourishing as properly embedded in a rich tissue of material, ecological interrelationships.

Liberation theologian Leonardo Boff was so taken, indeed, with the relevance of material interrelationships of ecology that they displaced to a large extent an earlier primacy given to human social thought. And Pope Francis has, [on all accounts](#), asked to read all of Boff's writings in the lead up to this encyclical.

In one sense, Boff is quite correct to assume that the earth is more fundamental to consider theologically compared with human beings. For a planet that dies will not be a proper or habitable home for humanity. But he seems to go further than suggesting that the purpose of the earth serves human origins and its continual becoming. In view of the destructive turn in humanity's dealing with the earth, and its domination of it, Boff insists that it is time to give the earth its due.

The domination of the planet is recognized by secular scholars through notions such as the geological era of the *Anthropocene*. The capacity of the earth to stabilize its conditions of temperature, and gaseous envelope, in James Lovelock's [Gaia hypothesis](#) is one that Boff takes extremely seriously. For the disruption of climate change in particular means that Gaian stability is under threat and is likely to collapse, given that conditions are rapidly approaching a tipping point.

Boff does not mince his words and is prepared to use apocalyptic language to reinforce his point. But it is his theological interpretation of such changes that landed him into the most trouble, since he seems to replace the traditional Genesis narrative with a Gaian one by presupposing the truth of Gaia aligns with the truth of the Holy Spirit.

Now, a belief that the Holy Spirit is at work in creation is not all that controversial. The early Church Fathers, such as Basil of Caesarea or Athanasius of Antioch, believed much the same. But Boff edges towards a belief that the earth is equated with God and this pantheistic view waters down the transcendent aspects of who God is.

We can assume that Pope Francis will resist at least this aspect of Boff's analysis.

Mercy and dominion

If the first step in finding human responsibility is that of ecological conversion, the second is recognition of what the path of love of creation entails. Creation must be distinguished from "nature": the latter is often used as a way of describing what can be found out by the experimental and human sciences. Attempting to make the two synonymous opens up the door to creationism and a host of unnecessary problems in relating theology to science.

Our understanding of creation is perceived as "nature" infused with the presence of God and therefore declared good or fit for purpose. The earth is, on this basis, the gift of God that should not be spurned, but be treated with respect. And John Paul II went so far as to indicate that the earth should be the subject of human mercy, in imitation of the mercy and compassion of God. So, in [*Dives in Misericordia*](#) (par. 2) he claims:

"The word and concept of 'mercy' seems to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it. This dominion of the earth, sometimes understood in one sided and superficial way, seems to leave no room for mercy."

The concept of human dominion is there, certainly, but cannot be interpreted as a domineering or oppressive relationship with the earth. Indeed, while the word "domination" does appear occasionally in some of the earliest documents of Catholic social thought, marking an ambivalence in the Catholic tradition towards the earth, such notions are now firmly out of the question. A renewed humanity, one that is responsive to and in a relationship - at least in a minimal sense of *stewardship* - with the earth is called for and endorsed.

Building justice and peace

We can expect Pope Francis not just to continue the interweaving of social justice and ecology, but also to reinforce the connectedness between different realms. While development and environmental concerns were split apart historically, we find

scholars recognizing their mutual dependence - so sustainable development is also integral human development.

Of course, Francis may, like many liberation theologians, avoid the word *development* altogether, associated as it is with the freight of colonial economic systems of power. Perhaps a better term in this context would be *maturation*, showing the benefit of some economic input, but also the awareness of limits. And it is the lack of awareness of limits that leads to situations of global injustice.

The shortages of resources all over the world alongside the impact of climate change continue to impact on political stability. That is why the last three pontiffs have all made sure that peace-making and creation care go hand in hand. So, in his [2014 Message for the World Day of Peace](#), Pope Francis recognized how fraternity between nations is also that with the natural world: "Fraternity helps to preserve and cultivate nature." Interventions in the natural world have to be "responsible," imbued with wisdom and "with respect for the beauty, finality, and usefulness of every living thing and its place in the ecosystem."

Justice breaks down where there is greed, and where dominion is interpreted wrongly as possession, exploitation and manipulation. So Francis will almost certainly call for, as he did in [World Youth Day in July 2013](#), a turning away from a culture of selfishness and individualism, to one that "builds up and leads to a more habitable world" through solidarity. And that solidarity is with the global family thought of as brothers and sisters.

But we can extend this solidarity further to the natural world, based on the thought of Francis of Assisi. In this way we find in [Pope Francis's press conference](#) on the way to Manila, his use of such language: "We have in a sense, lorded it over nature, over Sister Earth, over Mother Earth." Just as he also exclaimed in this context, "Thank God there are voices that are speaking out about this!" so now is the time when he can, through the encyclical, give full voice to such ideas.

The search for wisdom

There will undoubtedly be difficult issues discussed in the new encyclical. We can take just three examples.

First is geo-engineering a solution to climate change? This is a difficult question to answer. For while some regard geo-engineering as creative human response to mitigate climate change, and even as an emergency measure to be used as a last resort, it still repeats the hubristic error that human beings can successfully manage the planet for its own ends. There will always be some winners and losers in a geo-engineered world, and the unpredictability of its outcomes betrays a lack of wisdom.

Secondly, how can the idea of responsible parenthood, championed by the Catholic tradition, contribute to the reduction of environmental degradation? Pope Benedict XVI had already discussed the idea of responsible parenthood in *Caritas in Veritate*. The difference could be, this time, Pope Francis emphasising it more than his predecessor. Would this be intended to bear on a shift in attitudes to family life? Will he go as far as recommending smaller families, duly contained within a natural family planning ethic or not? This is hard to tell. Pope Francis may bring in the idea of individual conscience here, conscience that is informed by wider knowledge of a sense of global and familial responsibilities and the teaching of the Catholic Church.

A third example is related to anthropocentrism. Some scholars assert that Benedict XVI gives anthropocentric reasons for wanting to protect the environment, based on the impact that its destruction has on those that are poor, the prospects of future generations and disrespect for the creation that serves human ends. One could argue that Francis says something that departs from tradition in his statement: "God sometimes gives, but when mistreated nature never forgives." However, while this might sound radical, actually Pope John Paul II said much the same thing; the difference is that no one really took any notice before, and his thinking tended to be filtered through Benedict's resistance to nature's intrinsic value.

In *Centesimus Annus* (par. 37), for example, John Paul II states: "Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God, and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him." And while there are occasional references to wonder occasioned by the experience of the natural world in Benedict XVI's writings, we find in John Paul II a much closer attention to the restorative powers of the natural world and its aesthetic value; so John Paul II's [1990 Message for the World Day of Peace](#) claims definitively:

"Our very contact with nature has deep restorative power; contemplating of its magnificence imparts peace and security. The Bible speaks again and again of the beauty and goodness of creation, which is called to glorify God (cf. Gen.1.4ff; Ps8.2; 104.1ff; Wis 13.3-5; Sir 39.16, 33; 43.1, 9)."

The source of authority for Pope Francis will be that based on both a reflection on Scripture, prior statements of the Magisterium - especially, I suggest, those inspired by Pope (now Saint) John Paul II and to a more limited extent his predecessor - the Franciscan tradition that sees all creation as gift, and his own experience as one who has been formed in the context of Latin America.

He will want to appeal to the heart and not just the head, since the issues that face human beings in this millennium are those that require a passionate response.

So while he is unlikely to write in a way that is as philosophically sophisticated as we would expect from Benedict XVI, what we can expect is a document that is ethically challenging in its call to care for people and planet, provocative in its call to take climate change seriously, and deeply theological - perhaps even mystical - in its emphasis.

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