Chapter 36

Ecology

Few things that people do in public aggravate me to the extent that I would consider taking action. Yet I remember vividly a day a few years back when, sitting in my car, I saw a man in another car empty his overflowing ashtray in the middle of a parking lot, leaving a large pile of butts and ashes. This so disgusted me that I took off after him in hot pursuit. I have no idea what I intended to do if I caught up with him. I had two small children with me in the car, and, after a few moments, I simply trailed off, leaving me with only my anger and frustration.

With our new ecological awareness in recent years, fewer and fewer people would even dream of emptying an ashtray in the middle of a parking lot. Yet the current ecological crisis is not just about individual waste disposal; it is about the ozone layer, the rain forests, threatened species of plants and animals, the quality of available air and water, and the preservation of soil for farming.

Although a store employee could sweep up the butts and ashes in the parking lot, the larger butts and ashes of the systematic waste of human society are currently causing damage that may well be irreversible. Is it enough to get angry about it, but then trail off?

This Chapter

The final five chapters in *Gaudium et Spes* deal with "a number of particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age, needs which go to the roots of the human race" (*GS*, 46). Those issues include family, culture, economics, politics, and peace. In the conclusion of the document, the reader is told that the "conciliar program . . . will have to be followed up and amplified since it sometimes deals with matters in a constant state of development" (*GS*, 91).

If *Gaudium et Spes* were to be written today, I have little doubt that it would contain a separate chapter on ecology. At the time of Vatican II in the 1960s, what we now call "green movements" were sporadic and underground. Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, ecological concerns are at the forefront of important issues for people throughout the world. It is a global problem because the environment of the entire planet is perceived to be threatened. It is an urgent problem because time is such a factor. It is a social and personal problem because it calls for significant changes in people's lifestyles. It is a religious problem because it calls for changes in people's ways of thinking about their most basic relationship with God and with the rest of creation.

In this chapter we will discuss some of the theological issues related to ecology. Ecology deals with questions of the environment. It forces people to look more deeply at the contexts, including the ultimate context, within which life is lived. It poses the question of how everything fits together in the big picture. In that sense, ecology is an issue that naturally lends itself to theological reflection.

Dominion over All the Earth?

There is much debate today concerning the following passage from Genesis and the impact its interpretation has had on Christian attitudes toward the environment:

> Then God said: "Let us make man after our own image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground . . . God also said, "See, I give you every seed-bearing plant all over the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food. (Genesis 1:26, 29)

This passage reinforces the hierarchy established by the order of creation in the first of the two accounts of creation. Human beings are created by God last, as the final masterpiece to which all of the rest of creation was leading.

Gaudium et Spes expresses well the way in which Genesis has been interpreted by Christians as having universal application:

> According to the almost unanimous opinion of believers and unbelievers alike, all things on earth should be related to man as their center and crown. (*GS*, 12)

It should be noted that this view, which is here attributed to virtually all of humankind, is really most associated with Western monotheistic culture influ-

enced by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It has not been the dominant religious ideal either of Eastern religions or of the religions of native peoples. For that reason, the first half of the statement can be considered *ethnocentric*, because it projects the view of one portion of humankind on to everyone.

The second half of the statement, however, that human beings are the center and crown of all creation, is even more deeply criticized for being *anthropocentric*. That is, the statement proposes that humans have the highest place in the created universe and that everything else is in subordination to them. Nature exists not so much for its own sake but for the use and service of human beings.

In a well-known essay published in 1967, historian Lynn White said that "Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt" in regard to the ecology crisis.[1] White held that the environmentally exploitative nature of contemporary science and technology finds its roots within the anthropocentrism of the Christian tradition. The belief that human beings have mastery over nature had led human beings to justify their abusing the environment without any regard for the environment itself. White, himself a Christian, calls for the liberation of nature from the destructive domination of human beings. In this sense, the ecological movement is a liberation movement not unlike feminism or liberation theology.

In a 1985 article, theologian H. Paul Santmire revisits and evaluates White's seminal essay.[2] He reviews some of the vehement criticisms White's essay has received. Although in the end Santmire is very sympathetic to White's major concerns, he offers the following points:

> 1. Religion has not been the only factor shaping Western attitudes toward technology and the environment. Underlying economic forces have also been especially important.
>
> 2. The anthropocentric strain in Christianity is complemented by other strains that lead to concern for the environment. This is especially true of the theocentrism, or God-centeredness, that runs deeper than the human-centeredness. It also applies to the basic goodness of creation and to the cosmic dimensions of the redemption.

Santmire, therefore, gives Christianity's role in shaping ecological attitudes a more mixed review than White does. Although Santmire is critical of White, he also takes to task other critics of White who have failed to appreciate the important challenge underlying White's thesis. Are Christians called to overthrow their attitudes of human dominance that have helped to justify the rape of the earth?

Santmire concludes with an openness toward White's idea that St. Francis of Assisi, because of his solidarity with creation, is a most appropriate model for Christians today. Santmire simply disagrees with White's implication that St. Francis necessarily contradicts the mainstream Christian tradition rather than representing an important strain within it.

Stewardship

Some attempts to articulate Catholic teaching in an ecologically sensitive manner have focused on the concept of stewardship. Stewardship is the idea that human beings are the "stewards" or caretakers of creation. God is the owner or master; human beings are left in charge. Stewardship makes clear the theocentric (God-centered) context of any anthropocentric tendencies within the Christian tradition. That is, the belief in the exalted place of human beings is contextualized by an emphasis on the subordination of human beings to God. Human beings were created not to do with the environment simply as they please, but to tend to the environment, to nurture it, and care for it. In the second story of creation, we are told: "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it" (Genesis 2:15).

John Paul II expresses this contextualizing perspective in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987):

> The task is "to have dominion" over the other created beings, "to cultivate the garden." This is to be accomplished within the framework of obedience to the divine law and therefore with respect to the image received, the image which is the clear foundation of the power of dominion recognized as belonging to human beings as the means to their perfection. (section 30)

In other words, John Paul II is making clear that the charge of "dominion" must be understood within the context of human beings reflecting the image of their creator. Abuse of "dominion" is therefore the result of sin, not the result of Christians carrying out their proper purpose.

The Catholic bishops of the United States have released a statement on the environment, "Renewing the Earth," in which they make significant use of the metaphor of stewardship.[3] This concept allows them to be faithful to the traditional view that human beings are the high point of all creation while at the same time expressing the urgency of the ecological crisis.

Some proponents of the ecological movement do not believe that "stewardship" goes far enough. The God-centeredness may contextualize the

human-centeredness, but the human-centeredness still runs too deep. Jay B. McDaniel, for example, holds that one should appreciate that all of the elements of creation, including animals, plants, rocks, and stars, have an intrinsic value that is independent of their relations with human beings.[4] Stewardship still makes human beings the focal point of the value of creation. This discussion will receive much attention in the coming years.

A New Way of Thinking

Thomas Berry, a leading thinker in the area of ecological spirituality, says that humankind is entering into an entirely new period in history, which he calls the Ecozoic period.[5] The planetary developments of the last 65 million years (the Cenozoic period), such as birds, insects, and mature flowers, are being systematically destroyed as human beings make permanent and devastating changes in the environment. Human beings will either choose to continue to destroy the environment and themselves along with it, or else will make radical changes in thoughts, values, and lifestyles. Such changes must come not only through a reliance on our religious traditions and science, but also through a new listening to the voices of nature, women, primitive peoples, and childhood dreams. Art, poetry, and dance are as important for survival as the latest environmental technologies.

The ideas of Thomas Berry and others are presented in a highly readable format by Michael Dowd in *Earthspirit: A Handbook for Nurturing an Ecological Christianity*. Dowd makes clear that what is being called for is a whole new way of thinking about the cosmos and the place of human beings within it. He describes the earth itself as a living organism with human beings as the self-reflective element of that organism:

> . . . the fact that Earth is a living being just makes good, common sense. The physical structure of the planet—its core, mantle, and mountain ranges—acts as the skeleton or frame of its existence. The soil that covers its grasslands and forests is like a mammoth digestive system, into which all things are absorbed, broken down, and recycled. The oceans, waterways, and rain function as a circulatory system that provides life-giving blood, purifying and revitalizing the body. The vegetation of the planet, the algae, the plants, and the trees, provide its respiratory system, its lungs, constantly regenerating the entire atmosphere. The animal kingdom provides the lower functions of the nervous system, a finely tuned and diversified series of organisms that are sensitized to environmental change and have provided the first stages for the advent of humanity. Humanity itself can be understood as the capacity of the planet for conscious awareness and reflexive thought. That is, the human enables Earth to reflect on itself and on the divine Mystery out of which it has come and in which it exists.[6]

This understanding of the earth as a living organism is known as the "Gaia theory." Dowd does not find this a mere metaphor; he believes that it is scientifically supportable and thus both literally and mythically true. He voices clearly the opinion of many leading thinkers in the ecological movement when he argues that true growth in our culture will occur only as human beings radically revise their understanding of the story of the cosmos and of the place of human beings within it.

Dowd believes that Christianity is not to be rejected; it is, however, to be reinterpreted in the light of the new cosmology such that basic teachings can be appreciated in a fresh way. What we have traditionally thought of as "sin" finds its roots in our lack of awareness of our true place in the cosmos and of our interconnectedness with all things. "Salvation" will come through telling the new story of creation and getting in touch with the most basic principles of the universe. To follow Jesus is to experience the kingdom of God through unconditional, self-expansive love. The kingdom of God is itself the "Reality" in which the whole universe participates. For our time, "eternal life" can be understood as the continued evolution of the planet with human beings providing reflective awareness.

Some of my students find these ideas exciting and challenging. There remains, however, a huge gap between such concepts and traditional understandings of Christian doctrine. The dialogue concerning the relationship between Christianity and ecology has many important issues to work out.

Denial

Making the environment a matter of special concern is not simply a benevolent concession. It is a matter of survival for the human race and for the planet. What will be left for future generations after present society gets done pillaging the earth?

Psychologists talk about the problem of "denial." Denial involves the conscious repression of things that we are aware of unconsciously. An alcoholic who will not admit to having a problem is in denial. But there are other more subtle ways of being in denial. A person who says, "I admit that I am an alcoholic," but who goes right on drinking or only slightly alters some peripheral habits is still enmeshed in a web of denial. That person is denying the seriousness of the problem and is failing to take appropriate measures.

That today we live in denial of our environmental problems is a possibility worth considering. We say that we admit to them, but we fail to acknowledge their true seriousness or to take the radical steps to really do something about them. Many of us are recycling some percentage of our trash and trying to buy

reusable or biodegradable products, but most of us have not significantly altered our lifestyles to affect deeply the production and use of pollutants.

What would it take, for example, to reduce dramatically the first world's dependence (addiction?) on the use of oil as a source of energy? Are we willing to make alternative energy sources a top research priority? Are we willing to demand that our industries operate in an environmentally sound manner? Are we willing to change our diets to use food sources that do not harm the environment? Are we willing to seriously restrict the use of cars and to develop more extensive systems of mass transportation? What would it take to make truly significant improvements in the ways that human beings relate with the environment? This last question is currently receiving much study. To the extent that we are unwilling to do what it takes, we are in denial.

The Ecological Crisis as a Moral Issue

On the first day of the new decade of the 1990s, John Paul II issued a message on ecological concerns.[7] His main theme was that the widespread destruction of the environment is a moral as well as a technological problem. This is because a "lack of respect for life" underlies the ecological crisis. This is manifested first of all in a contempt for human beings that does not recognize the fundamental human "right to a safe environment." Destruction of the environment threatens the health and survival of human beings. The lack of respect for life is also seen in disregard for the harmonious order of the universe and for the beauty of creation. At the root of the problem is human greed, selfishness, and exploitation.

John Paul II argues that "we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations." He cites especially the depletion of the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect, industrial waste, unrestricted deforestation, and the exhaustion of farming soil. The following advice can be gleaned from his message:

1. Cultivate respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person.
2. Grow in one's awareness of the beauty of creation.
3. Appreciate the earth as a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all.
4. Develop a more internationally coordinated approach to the management of the earth's goods.
5. Work toward a new international solidarity, especially in relations between the developing nations and those that are highly industrialized.

6. Address the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world; rural poverty and unjust land distribution, for example, have led to subsistence farming and to the exhaustion of the soil.
7. Realize that today, any form of war on a global scale would lead to incalculable ecological damage.
8. Take a serious look at our personal lifestyles, especially in modern societies.
9. Become better educated concerning ecological responsibility.
10. Recognize the ecological crisis as the responsibility of everyone.

Concerning the change in lifestyles, John Paul II states:

> In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause. As I have already stated, the seriousness of the ecological issue lays bare the depth of the human moral crisis. If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the earth itself. 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. (section 13)

Summary

In this chapter we have reflected briefly on the ecological crisis in relation to Christianity. Scholars debate the extent to which the relationship between Christianity and the environment has been positive or negative. Current Catholic teaching emphasizes the concept of stewardship, which interprets the special role of human beings in the universe within the context of our responsibilities to God and to creation. Some in the ecological movement call for more radical changes in our thinking about the cosmos. John Paul II has urged all to become more aware of the seriousness of the crisis, its moral dimension, and the need to change attitudes, values, and behaviors.

For Further Reflection

1. On what occasions have you become outraged by the sight of someone littering, polluting, or otherwise destroying the environment?
2. Do you think that talk of the ecological crisis is either understated or overblown?

3. Is the concept of "stewardship" a good one, or do we need a whole new story of our place in the cosmos?
4. Is our society in denial about the ecological crisis?
5. Do you agree that underlying the ecological crisis is a moral crisis?

Suggested Readings

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Wessels, Cletus. *The Holy Web: Church and the New Universe Story.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.

Notes

Chapter 1: The Catholic Church Today

1. *New York Times,* February 28, 1990: A14.

2. "Statement of Catholic Theological Society of America," *Origins* 20 (27 December 1990): 461-67.

3. Pope John Paul II's apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*) can be found in *Origins* 20 (4 October 1990): 265-276. The U.S. Bishops' draft concerning its implementation in American universities can be found in *Origins* 28 (3 December 1998): 438-444. The most recent draft can be found in *Origins* 29 (2 December 1999): 401-415. Concerns over its implementation can be found in "Keeping Colleges Catholic: What's At Stake?" *Commonweal* (9 April 1999): 13-32.

4. "Vatican II: Promise and Reality," (Jamaica, NY: Fellowship of Catholic Scholars [offices at St. John's University], September 20, 1990), 20-21.

5. James Tunstead Burtchaell, C.S.C., "Everything You Need to Know About *Ex Corde Ecclesiae,*" *Crisis* 17 (July/August 1999): 10-38.

6. Dennis M. Doyle, Michael H. Barnes, and Byron R. Johnson, "Pluralism or Polarization? The Results of a CTS Survey," in *Raising the Torch of Good News,* ed. Bernard P. Prusak (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 278-79.

7. William M. Shea, "A Response," in *Raising the Torch of Good News,* 287-90.

8. James D. Davidson and others, *The Search for Common Ground: What Unites and Divides American Catholics* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1997).

Chapter 2: Challenges for the Church

1. Yves Congar, *Diversity and Communion* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985 [1982]), 92-93.

2. A collection of Marx's writings on religion can be found in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955).

3. Freud's most concise critique of religion can be found in *The Future of an Illusion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957 [1927]).