

## **The Vatican and Ecospirituality: Tensions, Promises and Possibilities for Fostering an Emerging Green Catholic Spirituality**

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### **Introduction**

Elizabeth Johnson maintains that the ecologically negative effects of the Enlightenment's turning to the self and the post-Reformation style of reflection on God, which together mark much of contemporary Christian thought, have not been sufficiently revised in light of an emerging and more holistic realisation of the biocentric realities of the web of life (8). Analysing contemporary ecclesiastical teachings and spiritual practices through a biocentric lens can help discern the presence of certain theological and ethical perspectives, which if put into practice, could either damage or strengthen the prospects for true sustainable peace in this world. Given the socio-political influence and ecological impact of the over 1 billion Catholics who populate this world, the absence of a biocentric focus to inform human behaviour can legitimately be viewed as problematic. One area of promise and tension in this regard can be found in the teaching office of the Roman Catholic Church.

Since the promulgation of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, the Roman Catholic Church has released many encyclicals that have addressed issues of poverty, human rights, justice, the sanctity of life, and the dignity of work and the human person. Employing critical analyses of economic, social and political structures, these documents seek a transformation of human behaviour and social structures in order to alleviate human suffering and promote human flourishing. Collectively, these documents are known as Catholic Social Teaching (CST). More recently, ecological issues have been added to the list of concerns that have gained the Vatican's attention.

For instance, Pope John Paul II's 1990 World Day of Peace message contains many seeds of a contextually appropriate ecological ethic that arguably fostered a promising greening of Catholic doctrine and practice, and firmly locates the true character of the ecological challenge in "a profound moral crisis *of which the destruction of the environment is only one troubling aspect*" (#1.5; original emphasis). However, in

John Paul II's message, "moral" is cast in anthropocentric terms and, therefore, the crisis is framed within the context of human relationships, in a crucial sense remaining removed from humanity's fundamental integration with the rest of creation. Thus, his construction of morality and the moral community is unduly anthropocentric (as opposed to cosmocentric, ecocentric or biocentric). This anthropocentric perspective, which has clearly not undergone the shift advocated by Elizabeth Johnson above, is also evident in Benedict XVI's 2010 World Day of Peace message entitled "If You Want Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation":

If the Church's magisterium expresses grave misgivings about notions of the environment inspired by ecocentrism and biocentrism, it is because such notions eliminate the difference of identity and worth between the human person and other living things. In the name of a supposedly egalitarian vision of the "dignity" of all living creatures, such notions end up abolishing the distinctiveness and superior role of human beings. They also open the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism, which would see the source of man's salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms. The Church, for her part, is concerned that the question be approached in a balanced way, with respect for the "grammar" which the Creator has inscribed in his handiwork by giving man the role of a steward and administrator with responsibility over creation, a role which man must certainly not abuse, but also one which he may not abdicate. (#13)

Taking into account such recent developments, this article will argue that a substantive, lasting, and sustainable peace could be effectively fostered by precisely the biocentric sensitivity and the type of ecospirituality that are condemned in the above quotation. That is, since CST is meant to reform human behaviour in order to alleviate suffering and promote flourishing, the introduction of a more biocentric focus would revise CST so that it could more effectively support behaviours that are mutually enhancing for humanity and the rest of creation. Accordingly, this article will begin by showing how a biocentric focus can enhance key CST principles such as the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, the protection of human rights, and the option for the poor. Then, it will demonstrate that notions of biocentrism and ecocentrism, far from being outside of the Catholic Church's tradition as one might suspect from their denunciation by Benedict XVI, can actually be supported by appeals to that same tradition. The article concludes that the incarnation of ecologically updated CST principles and a deeper awareness of biocentrism would greatly advance efforts to achieve an integral peace, which in Christian ecospiritual terms, could be characterised as peace with God, peace with neighbour, and peace with the rest of creation under conditions of substantive justice. For such a sustainable peace to be realised, the Magisterium would need to acknowledge more fully the ecospiritual insight that the teaching function of the Catholic Church, like all realms of human activity and endeavours, takes place within the web of life. Perhaps the key to transformative

ecological updating along these lines is an integral understanding of what arguably constitutes the most important element of CST, the common good.

## **The Common Good**

With its academic origins in ancient Greece, the notion of the common good has a long history within Western ethics. Tracing the development of this concept in CST, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales define the common good “as the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a fully, genuinely human life, otherwise described as ‘integral human development.’ All are responsible for all, collectively, at the level of society or nation, not only as individuals” (#48). This definition illustrates a reality that moves beyond the European Enlightenment’s focus on the particular desires of the self, and even beyond the sum of all the particular desires of individuals in a society. As such, the notion of the common good asserts that each person is a social being who reaches his/her potential only through relationships with others. When this insight is extended in terms of an ecospiritual moral reference point that includes the entire Earth community, it can provide an ethical basis for the establishment of a more biocratic system.<sup>1</sup> In terms relevant to this article, the embrace of ecological “others” can move people toward more fully integrating the notion that the common good includes more than just human others. More specifically, concern for the common good of one’s neighbour has the potential to extend understandings of “neighbour” to include all those who contribute to the well-being of creation, both human and other-than-human alike (Hunt 194-95).

Biocentric principles work on a foundational premise of interconnectedness. They are concerned with relationships and the healing of all parties in the Earth community. In this light, efforts to enact more fully an ecological vision of peace for today can be aided by a spirituality that allows for the fostering and enabling of mutually enhancing relationships as expressed in the notion of the integral common good. The resultant biocratic system would permit the flourishing of all members of the larger life community. This vision of the common good maintains the distinctiveness of the human but at the same time recognises that human dignity cannot help but be located within a creative functioning of the entire life community. This formulation points to the contingency of the common good in a way not always recognised by the Magisterium, namely, that the common good is contingent upon and has its basis in the

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<sup>1</sup> In the assessment of the American cultural historian, Roman Catholic priest of the Passionist order, and self-described geologist, Thomas Berry, biocracy comes into being as we re-invent the human so as to re-order our relationships among ourselves and the larger life community in a mutually enhancing manner. When unfolding his vision of a biospiritual universe, Berry articulates the imperatives for a movement “beyond democracy to biocracy” (*The Dream of the Earth* xiii). As part of such a biocratic movement, our human decision-making processes integrate perspectives from the larger-life community.

Earth and Universe communities.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, it is difficult to see how the expressions of the common good can be incarnated today without the presence of the other four principles at the heart of CST: subsidiarity, solidarity, the protection of human rights, and the option for the poor.

## **Subsidiarity**

In “Economic Justice for All,” the US Catholic Bishops assert that “[t]he teachings of the [Catholic] Church insist that government has a moral function: protecting human rights and securing basic justice for all members of the commonwealth. Society as a whole and in all its diversity is responsible for building up the common good” (#122). To support the common good and to foster social and economic justice, the government enacts laws and regulations. This does not, however, mean that the government should dictate every principle and procedure to be carried out by individuals within a society. Indeed, to be authentic, governance and the sharing of power must be dialogical and multidirectional in nature. As such, CST maintains that things which can be accomplished on a micro-level should never be moved up to the macro-level just because power dynamics make such a shift possible. This principle of subsidiarity asserts that:

Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them (Pius XI #79).

Although Pope Pius’ description of subsidiarity eight decades ago did not envision a more biocratic approach to governance, given today’s fuller understanding of ecological dynamics, it is arguably possible to expand the notion of subsidiarity to include those other “voiceless” members of the ecosystem whose critical and essential roles are often ignored in favour of a “superior” and dominant human perspective. In the terms of discursive whole Earth governance, certain humans could endeavour to act as proxies on behalf of those members of the ecological community who lack the ability for direct human discourse (see Eckersley) when decisions are made that affect the common good. Such a biocratic system stands in contrast to the stewardship model advocated by Pope Benedict in his World Day of Peace message.

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<sup>2</sup>This follows, for instance, from Thomas Berry’s observation that the Earth is primary and the human is derivative (*Evening Thoughts* 43).

A stewardship model is problematic from an ecospiritual perspective when it is based on the understanding that: 1) the steward replaces the Lord or owner of the estate or kingdom who is not present; 2) the steward knows how to manage the estate/kingdom; and 3) the estate/kingdom needs managing. Constructed in this manner, the stewardship model supports a hierarchical expression of power and authority. As such, from an ecospiritual perspective, it represents a deficient description of humanity's relationship with the rest of creation because: 1) God is not solely transcendent and removed from creation; God is also immanent; 2) humanity has demonstrated that it does not have the knowledge or means to manage Earth's complex ecosystems, and anthropogenic destruction of the planet attests to this ignorance; and 3) Earth survived and thrived for 4.5 billion years without people; it therefore does not require human management in order to flourish (Santmire, "Partnership with Nature" 381-412).

In significant contrast to a stewardship model, subsidiarity allows for the possibility of seeing political challenges in their socio-ecological context, and thus helps to foster creative solutions to problems facing the Earth community. Ecospirituality and a contextually revised CST can combine to work for substantive and sustainable peace by supporting ecologically just solutions that expand the notion of stakeholder to include all the members of the Earth community. At the same time, subsidiarity also allows for the intervention of more macro-levels of authority in matters of substantive peace and justice when the local context has failed to deliver just outcomes oriented toward the common good. This "check" is meant to be the manner in which authority functions in the Roman Catholic Church. However, to remain an exercise of authority in line with the principle of subsidiarity, the power to intervene should only ever be that, a check. This interpretation of subsidiarity forms an intricate part of the policy framework of the European Union, where the principle of subsidiarity has been written into both the *Treaty of Maastricht* (1993) and the *Treaty of Nice* (2003), was also of part of the (now replaced) proposed *European Constitution* (Draft 2005), and remains enshrined in the text of *Treaty of Lisbon* (2007).

Be it in its ecclesiastical or political applications, the principle of subsidiarity is meant to draw an important distinction absent in both *laissez faire* and totalitarian approaches to political relationships by employing the common good as the key moral yardstick. It follows that intervention is required when the common good is adversely affected by human activity. Most crucially, in line with the green maxim of thinking globally but acting locally, subsidiarity affirms that when the local community can deal with its problems in ways that support the common good, then it is improper for a higher authority to exert its power and displace decision-making from other (more local) moral and political actors.

## Solidarity

Such a methodology for the practice of justice gets further strengthened when one realises that interdependence is a moral category. This category for substantive peace and justice is firmly established in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, where John Paul II writes of the “perspective of universal interdependence [...] [that] [t]rue development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services, if this is gained at the expense of the development of the masses” (#9). Combining this insight with the revealing biocratic lens of an ecospiritual perspective, we can then conclude that the common good has been adversely affected when any members of the Earth community are exploited or wantonly destroyed for human greed or avarice. As such, deep solidarity recognises that under conditions of oppression, all members of a society suffer, including the other-than-human ones. In times of ecological crisis and suffering, all members of the interdependent ecological community must be considered when promoting solutions that both heal and build towards the future. In the current geo-political situation, exercises of social and ecological justice may be creating spaces for such an expanded notion of acting together in solidarity. As *Gaudium et Spes* teaches, “[o]ne of the salient features of the modern world is the growing interdependence of men [sic] one on the other” (Second Vatican Council #23). While CST asserts that there can be no progress towards the complete development of the human person without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity (see Paul VI #43), a biocratic ecospirituality expands this understanding of interdependence and co-reliance to an inclusion of other members of the Earth community.

## The Protection of Human Rights

In the contemporary context, efforts have been made to polarise economic and social justice for humans against ecological justice for the rest of Earth's community, as if the achievement of one were unrelated to the other, or could only materialise if one or the other concern was sacrificed. Such a narrow, dualistic perspective underestimates the degree to which humans are integrated into Earth's ecosystems and denies the necessity for both goals to be achieved symbiotically.

CST has a long history of championing human rights. In *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which is often considered to be the foundational document of contemporary CST, Pope Leo XIII argued that all people have a “natural right [...] to enter into associations” to promote their own benefit (#51). More recently, Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963) declared that every “[m]an [sic] has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper



development of life [...]” (#11). Furthermore, the encyclical asserts that “[a]s a human person he is entitled to the legal protection of his [sic] rights, and such protection must be effective, unbiased, and strictly just” (#27).

The vigorous defence of human rights found within CST is both commendable and instructive. It is important to note that, in contrast with the position of many secular jurists, from a CST perspective, these rights flow from the inherent dignity of the person graced by God, and are not conferred by others (John XXIII #s38, 47). Similarly, Christian ecospirituality points to how other participants in God’s good creation enjoy fundamental rights appropriate to their existence. As John Hart asserts in *Sacramental Commons*,

anthropocentrism must be set aside and replaced by an awareness that all members of the biotic community have an inherent goodness and value that should be respected; that people should relate well to other creatures and share with them a common Earth home viewed as a commons; and that “common good” understandings should be extended to non-human creation. (67-68)

Hart argues that an ecospiritual recognition of the inherent sacredness of all creation, including humans, would tend to foster a greater respect for all who reside within that sacred domain (77). An ecospirituality that expands, but does not diminish, the CST notions of common good, subsidiarity, solidarity and basic rights, would rejoin the artificial decoupling of, on the one hand, socio-economic justice for humans and, on the other, ecological justice for all life forms. In this light, rather than viewing each other as competitors, CST and a biocentric ecospirituality could form a mutually enhancing partnership.

Such a symbiotic partnership emerges as increasingly necessary because it is not possible to benefit from human rights that promote human flourishing if the context in which those rights must be exercised—i.e. a healthy Earth community—is so diminished as either to imperil human existence or serve as an obstacle to human flourishing. For these reasons, Berry argues that all creatures, human and other-than-human alike, enjoy at least three basic rights: a right to exist, a right to habitat, and a right to access the resources that they require to fulfil their contribution to the epic of evolution. No creature, human or other-than-human, can be denied these basic rights. However, Berry also recognises how a conflict of rights can follow from such an assertion. To resolve this conflict, he notes that “all rights are limited and relative” (Berry, *The Great Work* 5). For instance, a carrot’s right to existence would not necessarily preclude a person’s right to nourishment, nor would a person’s right to habitat necessarily preclude the right of an endangered species to its bioregion. The creative tension posed by seemingly conflicting rights needs to be resolved in ways that promote the greater good within the longer arc of history (Berry, *The Great Work* 58-59, 169), in line with the principles of subsidiarity and biocracy described above. As Daniel Cowdin notes,

Catholic environmental ethics at present lacks the kind of action-guiding moral traction that is typical of other areas in the Catholic moral tradition. [...] [That] problem is partially remedied by the application of preexisting norms from Catholic social teaching to environmental issues. The universal destiny of goods, with its communitarian perspective on property ownership and the preferential option for the poor as it connects to ecojustice are two principles effectively applied by Catholic environmentalism, both in its scholarly and institutional forms. So the normative gap is not total. (Cowdin 180-181)

With Cowdin's prompting, we come to appreciate a wider and more ecological understanding of "the option for the poor."

### **The Option for the Poor**

In 2001, the Social Affairs Commission of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops released an open letter to Members of Parliament entitled: "The Common Good or Exclusion: A Choice for Canadians." At a time when Canada had the fastest growing economy of all the G-7 countries, the Bishops asked why all Canadians were not sharing in this wealth. The Bishops argued that when the rising "tide" of economic growth did not lift "the boats" of all people equally, the resultant increase in economic exclusion was a major threat to the common good (#3). In particular, they noted that four groups in Canadian society were being marginalised by their poverty: women, indigenous peoples, newcomers, and children (#8).

When championing the cause of people on the margins of society, the CST option for the poor becomes "not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather, it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Economic Justice" #88). This declaration emphasises that society is not comprised of a mere collection of individuals but is rather a community of subjects integrally related to each other.<sup>3</sup>

The above emphasis on the interconnection between people echoes this article's earlier discussion of the interconnectivity of humanity with the rest of the ecosystem. People simply cannot flourish if the environment in which they dwell is significantly diminished; it is not possible to have healthy and thriving people on an ill or impoverished planet. Again, a key focus of CST—this time, the option for the poor—

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Berry sees this situation of interconnectedness in the universe as arising from its quality as the "only self-referent mode of being." It follows that: "Since all living beings, including humans, emerge out of this single community there must have been a bio-spiritual component of the universe from the beginning. Indeed we must say that the universe is a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects" (Berry, "Ethics and Ecology").



can be reframed within a larger context in order to deepen an understanding of that principle. Just as solidarity was not limited to people only, and the common good was not intended for humans alone, “the poor” are not solely to be defined as humans living in poverty. Such a reframing does actually not lessen a concern for human poverty; rather, it might offer a better understanding of its causes. As Rosemary Radford Ruether has noted, the attitudes and values that permit the exploitation and domination of vulnerable peoples are often the same attitudes and values that permit the exploitation and domination of Earth (Ruether 97). Accordingly, addressing these common etiological factors would benefit both marginalised humans and marginalised members of the rest of Earth’s community. As such, an expression of CST informed by ecospirituality and biocratic principles is well-situated to address the underlying causes of global oppression and exploitation. It can emphasise the fundamental importance of interconnection and interconnectivity for the formation of healthy communities, both human and other-than-human, since a community’s viability is significantly determined by the health and empowerment of those at the margins.

The CST concept of the option for the poor has traditionally addressed the absence of true decision-making power in the lives of people who were most marginalised and denied adequate resources to flourish within human society. In his 1985 World Day of Peace message, Pope John Paul II asserted:

It is essential for every human being to have a sense of participating, of being a part of the decisions and endeavours that shape the destiny of the world. Violence and injustice have often in the past found their root causes in people’s sense of being deprived of the right to shape their own lives. Future violence and injustice cannot be avoided when the basic right to participate in the choices of society is denied. ("Peace and Youth" #9)

People are denied the right to properly and fully participate in society when they must expend most of their energy on mere survival, in a struggle for food, shelter, potable water, and security of person. There remains precious little time for the pursuit of those human activities that speak to the deeper purposes of human existence (Second Vatican Council #s24-25, #41; Paul VI #15).

An application of CST informed by ecospirituality and attentive to biocratic principles seeks to more closely address the etiological underpinnings of political, economic and social exclusion. Such a transformed CST recognises that, in order for this wider common good that John Hart identifies to become incarnated, the most vulnerable and those living in poverty within both human societies and the rest of creation must be respected and valued in their own right. Disenfranchisement from communities has serious repercussions for those who are excluded and lessens their ability to effectively contribute to the well-being of broader societies. Quite simply, the potential of those

who are marginalised to make a creative contribution to the common good is diminished in proportion to their exclusion.

A growing ecological awareness and the ecospiritual application of CST presented above necessitate renewed approaches to peace and justice, ones that “move beyond the slogans of the moment and the excuses of the past [...] and [understand] that the search for real community requires far more than the policy clichés of conservatives and liberals” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Responsibility” #3). An ecospiritual reframing of CST urges people to see the present need for a system that responds with love to ecological degradation, as well as the need for an integral vision of peace and justice which effects healing for the rich and poor (in the multiple meanings of those terms) alike. Creating such a system amounts, at once, to a mutual challenge and goal for both the promulgators of CST and ecojustice advocates. Further, it is a *telos* that each constituency can reach more readily with the mutual support of the other. Such a goal represents a highly, socially relevant application of integral ecospirituality in this world. The ethical consequence of this connection is made explicit in the 2003 letter of the Social Affairs Committee of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Through his Incarnation, Jesus Christ not only entered and embraced our humanity; he also entered and embraced all of God’s creation. Thus all creatures, great and small, are consecrated in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. This is why [...] in Catholic social thought, the common good should be conceived as the sustenance and flourishing of life for all beings and for future generations. The call for a “new solidarity” should take into consideration not only the economic needs of all people but also environmental protection in order to provide for all. [...] *The preferential option for the poor can be extended to include a preferential option for the earth, made poorer by human abuse.* (#7; added emphasis)

### **A Direct Response to Benedict XVI’s Position**

Expressions of a socially-engaged ecospirituality by local Bishops’ conferences embrace key tenets of biocentric and ecocentric worldviews despite the more anthropocentric framings of the problem presented by John Paul II and Benedict XVI in their respective World Day of Peace messages. The local bishops and ecotheologians mentioned above describe an integral ecospiritual teaching and practice, drawing support from within the Roman Catholic tradition itself. By responding directly to Benedict’s position on biocentrism and ecocentrism in his 2010 message, “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation,” this article will further strengthen that foundation.

Benedict XVI charges biocentrism and ecocentrism with faults of which they are not necessarily guilty.<sup>4</sup> As the present Pope seems to be concerned with an extreme

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<sup>4</sup> For simplicity, the term “biocentrism” is here used to refer to both biocentrism and ecocentrism. The authors fully acknowledge that the terms are not entirely interchangeable and, in fact, prefer the more

form of biocentrism, it can be shown that biocentrism, properly understood, is not necessarily tainted with the flaws that Benedict ascribes to the position. Furthermore, one can draw on the Franciscan spiritual tradition,<sup>5</sup> a tradition with which Benedict is quite familiar given his interest in the work of Bonaventure (see Allen), to fashion a biocentric ecospirituality. Consequently, it proves doubly appropriate to employ Franciscan theology and spirituality to describe a form of biocentrism that can be comfortably situated within the larger Catholic tradition itself.

In his 2010 World Day of Peace message, Benedict uses the dualistic language of humans and nature as if humans were not part of the natural world – a practice that is problematic from a biocentric perspective. In section 13 of that message, previously cited in the introduction to this paper, he writes: “a correct understanding of the relationship between man and the environment will not end by absolutizing nature or by considering it more important than the human person” (#13). This language reveals the absence of an ecospiritual worldview cognizant of the absolute interdependence of humans with the rest of creation. The Pope's message thus reflects a perspective that ignores that humans are derived from evolutionary processes as well as dependent on the health and integrity of the planet. A more comprehensive worldview realises that when it comes to human health, Earth's health is primary and human health derivative since, everything else being equal, an ill person does not threaten the existence of the planet, while an ill planet does threaten the existence of humans. As noted above, though it is simply not possible to have healthy people on a diseased planet, it proves, however, quite possible to have a healthy planet with some or even all humans on it suffering from illnesses (Berry, *The Great Work* 113). This observation about the derivative nature of human life, consistent with a more biocentric perspective, does not mean that Earth is “more important than humans” *per se*, but it does mean that humans cannot exist without Earth, while Earth could surely exist without humans. Indeed, working within a deep green ecospiritual worldview, hierarchical speculations that humans are more important than the rest of creation, or vice versa, appear rather outmoded since they belie the interrelatedness of the diverse elements of the natural world. Further, they recall a theological anthropology that saw the Earth statically stationed at the centre of a universe that revolved around it, with humanity residing at

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relational undertones invoked by the term ecocentrism. However, for the purposes of this article, these terms may legitimately and reasonably be conflated, since Benedict's complaint is addressed equally to both positions, which he considers to be unduly nature-centred. In other contexts, it remains worth noting that biocentrism recognises the inherent value and rights of other-than-human living organisms, while etymologically, ecocentrism expands that valuation to include both living and non-living systems.<sup>5</sup> In an article that explored Benedict's comments in *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times*, a book collecting the week-long series of interviews with German journalist Peter Seewald, *National Catholic Reporter* columnist John L. Allen, Jr. noted Benedict's affinity for the works of certain prominent Doctors of the Church. Allen recalled Benedict's quip: “I am friends with Augustine, with Bonaventure, with Thomas Aquinas” (Allen).

the peak of a hierarchically ordered great chain of being. This analysis suggests that Benedict's statement in section 13 of his 2010 World Peace Day message may still bear the lingering effects of such an anachronistic and morally constrictive cosmological worldview.

In contrast, an ecospirituality which integrates evolutionary consciousness emphasises the interdependence of all of creation. Such an integral spirituality understands that each new chapter in the evolutionary story is dependent on and formed by that which preceded it, just as what happens today informs how the story can unfold tomorrow. Thus, each player in the creation story contributes to the unfolding epic of evolution in a significant way. It follows that later players in the cosmological story, including humans, are derived from and beholden to earlier players in that narrative for their existence. For example, humans would not exist without the work of prokaryotes to develop photosynthesis and to oxygenate the planet, or without the work of eukaryotes to develop genetic transfer through a form of reproduction that exchanged genetic material between the mating partners (Swimme and Berry 84-95). Similarly, the planet would be impoverished without the uniquely human contribution of self-reflective consciousness (Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* 87, 132). Each of these roles in the Earth community and in the epic of evolution is important. This geological reality does not make prokaryotes more important than humans, or humans more important than prokaryotes, in a general sense, although humans could not have come into existence without the prior existence of prokaryotes, while prokaryotes were not dependent on human emergence for their existence (even if, admittedly, anthropogenic destruction of the planet now imperils the continuance of their existence). When it comes to photosynthesis, prokaryotes are more skilled; whereas when it comes to self-reflective consciousness, humans show a greater aptitude. Accordingly, section 13 of Benedict's text can be modified to note that the "supposedly egalitarian vision of the 'dignity' of all living creatures [does not] end up abolishing the distinctiveness" of human beings. Instead, however, such a view does question the so-called "superior role of human beings" made into an absolute position, as well as the refusal to relativise the unique abilities of humans and to see them as arising from relationships implicit in geological history.

In this manner, "[a] biocentric view rejects hierarchy and the human illusion that it is possible to manage or control nature and instead favours reciprocity in relationship with nature" (Howell 234). This ecospiritual insight mitigates a human hubris that is prone to viewing humanity as superior to other creatures, in part because of a tendency to assess those creatures by how well they manifest inherently human traits. However, for example, human self-reflective consciousness would be disastrous for a gazelle and of little use to a sunflower, just as urban humans suddenly infused with a gazelle's perspective and consciousness would undoubtedly act in ways hazardous for

themselves and others. If the sole measure of superiority over other creatures were self-reflective consciousness, then human dominance over the rest of nature might, in a sense, be justified. Yet, this would be a limited way to assess or appreciate the other parts of creation. Similarly, the human species would fail miserably if measured against the flying abilities of an eagle or the diving skills of an orca. As Holmes Rolston III has noted: “Man [sic] may be (in some advanced senses) the only *measurer* of things, but it does not follow that man is the only *measure* of things” (Rolston 32). From an integral ecospiritual perspective, such anthropocentric arrogance has proved a barrier preventing the realisation of the goal of peace with God, creation and neighbour that both John Paul II and Benedict XVI are purportedly seeking to foster with their messages.

### **An Alternative Ecospirituality for Benedict XVI: Franciscan Biocentrism**

Franciscan spirituality can provide a particularly useful resource to aid a conversion of the Vatican to a more biocentric and substantively peaceful position. Significant support for this ecological updating can be found in the work of the Franciscan theologian and Doctor of the Church,<sup>6</sup> Bonaventure (1217-1274), whom Benedict has called his friend in theology (see Allen and footnote 5). In describing a “Franciscan biocentrism,” Mizzone notes that the founder of the Franciscan order, “Francis of Assisi—famous as patron saint of ecology—recognised intrinsic value in all living things and believed that humans ought to respect those values; thus, he held a biocentric position” (122). Bonaventure’s own work “offers grounds for the sacredness of creation and for assigning intrinsic value to everything in the created world” (Mizzone 122). Delio adds that “the doctrine of relations between God and creation is key to Bonaventure’s position, since there is no created being apart from the creating principle who is God” (12).

Writing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Bonaventure extolled the created world as

a book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity, at three different levels of expression: as a trace, an image, and a likeness. The aspect of trace is found in every creature; the aspect of image, in the intellectual creatures or rational spirits; the aspect of likeness, only in those who are God-conformed. (*Breviloquium* 2:12,104, qtd. in Mizzone 122)

Mizzone, drawing out this point, comments that to assert “all created things are at least vestiges of the divine is to say that the cosmos is *theophanic*, [or] “God-revealing.” The

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<sup>6</sup> In the Roman Catholic tradition, “Doctor of the Church” is a title accorded to a select group of Saints who have contributed in a significant and enduring way to Catholic intellectual tradition. By papal pronouncements, Bonaventure was made a saint only eight years after his death and Doctor of the Church in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. He is known as the “Seraphic Doctor” due to his deep expression of love for God (see Robinson).

theophanic nature of creation—that all created things image God in some way—is at the heart of a Franciscan ecotheology” (122). In this Franciscan ecospiritual formulation, Bonaventure and Mizzoni alert their readers to a biocentric way of understanding humanity’s role in creation. A “trace” of the divine goodness is found in all aspects of God’s creation, while simultaneously the “image” of the divine is attributed to creatures who have intellect and rational thinking such as humans. However, only those humans who are in right relationship with God, and, therefore, in right relationship with God’s creation, provide an adequate mimetic model of the Divine. While perhaps not wholly satisfying to deep green practitioners of ecospirituality, this understanding is certainly an improvement on the stewardship model. Furthermore, such an understanding echoes Benedict’s own discussion of *imago Dei*, specifically concerning the role of image and likeness of God, found in the document “Communion and Stewardship,” published when Benedict was the president of the International Theological Commission.<sup>7</sup>

In line with the discussion of the core principles of CST earlier in this article, Delio applies Bonaventure’s framework to ecospiritual problems of peace, justice, and the integrity of creation:

Bonaventure’s exemplarism holds several important values with regard to creation: (1) Everything that exists—stars, quarks, sand, sun, etc.—bears a reflection of God’s overflowing Goodness and thus is sacramental. All created things visibly express, in some way, God’s power, wisdom, and Goodness. (2) Since Goodness is the cause of all that exists, the goodness of created reality has a common cause; hence, all of creation is intrinsically related, including human persons who are related to non-human creation by nature of the good. (3) The identity of being as goodness is based on relationship. Bonaventure’s doctrine of exemplarism hence supports an ontology of relationship, since created being is not being as object but being as subject. [...] What Bonaventure brings to light is the intrinsic goodness of created reality, shifting the focus from objects of relationships to relational objects, since goodness by nature is relational. The question, therefore, is not, “what is it?” but rather, “How is it related?” It is relationship itself that bestows identity on that which exists, not the form of that which is in relationship. The idea that relationships impart identity complements new findings in science today, according to which emergence supports the appearance of new life and ecological systems are seen as dynamic processes rather than statistical entities. ...[R]elationships are no longer vertical but horizontal – organically ecological – and therefore must be supported by structures that ensure justice and peace. (16-17)

Delio’s text describes an unfolding of ecospirituality that understands the importance of substantively peaceful and integrated relationships. Further, its more “horizontal” nature challenges the great chain of being or hierarchical, vertical model of relationship

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<sup>7</sup> In this document, Benedict (then Cardinal Ratzinger) writes: “A significant development of the biblical account was the distinction between image and likeness, introduced by St. Irenaeus, according to which 'image' denotes an ontological participation (*methexis*) and 'likeness' (*mimêsis*) a moral transformation” (International Theological Commission #15).



that Benedict is using to champion the superior role of humans. As Thomas Berry notes, echoing Bonaventure,

nothing is itself without everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. Any being can benefit only if the larger context of its existence benefits. [...] Especially in the realm of living beings there is an absolute interdependence. No living being nourishes itself. [...] The greatest of human discoveries in the future will be the discovery of human intimacy with all those other modes of being that live with us on this planet, inspire our art and literature, reveal that numinous world whence all things come into being, and with which we exchange the very substance of life. (*The Great Work*, 147-149)

Deep relational connectivity can be seen through such unfolding to be at the heart of integral spirituality.

There is an ever-growing number of Roman Catholic institutions that have deeply embraced the perspective of ecospirituality and a Franciscan biocentrism, in an attempt to further the emergence of the Vatican's work for peace, justice and the integrity of creation. Among these champions have been the "green sisters," who use an integrated ecological ethic to inform their spirituality as well as the ecojustice and social justice activism that follow from it (see McFarland Taylor). For instance, the Sisters of Saint Francis provide a link to Benedict's 2010 World Day of Peace message on their "Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation" webpage. The same page also links to the Franciscan Action Networks' campaign for Lent 2011, "Creation Crucified," which based its organising theme on the confluence of Earth Day and Good Friday in that particular year. That campaign encouraged action and a spirituality directed toward caring for both people living in poverty as well as the rest of creation (see Sisters of Saint Francis). Such an expression of integral spirituality builds on the Vatican's declaration of Saint Francis of Assisi as the patron saint of those who promote ecological concerns (see John Paul II, *Inter Sanctos*). The Franciscan Action Network cites the examples of Jesus, and Francis and Clare of Assisi in their "C4C: Franciscan Care of Creation" ecospiritual servant leadership adult formation programme. As part of this programming, the Franciscans seek to foster a spiritual energy for Christian life working toward peace, justice, and the health of the natural world, by invoking key principles of CST that inform and sustain an ecospirituality which, in turn, informs and sustains concrete action toward substantive and sustainable peace (see Franciscan Action Network).

### **An Alternative to Pantheism**

In his World Day of Peace message of 2010, Pope Benedict raises the concern that "notions of the environment inspired by ecocentrism and biocentrism [...] open the way to a new pantheism tinged with neo-paganism which would see the source of man's

salvation in nature alone, understood in purely naturalistic terms” (Benedict #13). Benedict XVI fears that biocentrism conflates the Divine and the natural, with the result that the transcendent dimension of God is lost and the natural world takes on attributes that rightly reside with the Divine only. However, while a pantheist might assert that God is everywhere and everything is God, a panentheist remains careful enough to note that while God is everywhere and everything is *in* God, everything is *not* God. Nor is God limited to the phenomenal world. The biocentric ecospirituality favoured by Christian ecotheologians draws on panentheism rather than pantheism. Panentheism “allows for the fact that God is present in the created world, while not limiting God to the created world. Each creature in the cosmos has intrinsic value because there is an intimate link between the Trinity and creation” (Mizzoni 123). However, this potential to view the universe as a bio-spiritual communion of subjects is obscured when Benedict connects “the grammar of creation” to a vision of an avowedly “natural” hierarchy passed down to humans as their “patrimony.”

Yet, there exist other, more substantively peaceful options here. For instance, Kevin Keane notes that “given reality at its deepest (or highest) levels is [...] a dynamic diffusion of the Good/Being, Bonaventure sees creation—and finite Being as such—as a limited actualization (finite Being) of the infinite and dynamic life that marks the divine order” (Keane 112-113). However, according to Benedict’s present reading of the “grammar of creation,” exercising moral duty properly rests on discerning humanity’s place within a hierarchical created order. From a contextual perspective, such thinking is increasingly emerging as problematic, not only in terms of human-Earth relationships (where it lends itself too readily to anthropocentrism), but also in terms of inter-human interactions. Indeed, remarkably nimble efforts graft this hierarchical “grammar of creation” onto ethically disconnecting agendas which precipitate all manners of inequity—from exclusionary socially-constructed notions of gender to racism and classism—which in turn detract from the prospects of a reality of sustainable peace ever truly becoming incarnated. In contrast, acknowledging an egalitarian Earth community as an appropriate starting point for Catholic social ethics would challenge exclusionary and/or marginalising hierarchical structures, including those that uphold “the superior role of human beings” or the exclusion of women from formal governance roles. By emphasising the links between ecological health, social justice and peace, a contextually revised CST (and indeed, future magisterial teaching) can overcome segmentary approaches to theological anthropology that ultimately nurture oppression and division.

### **Conclusion: The Contextual Need to End the Ambiguity**

In *The Travail of Nature* (1985), Paul Santmire writes about the ambiguity that the Christian tradition has embodied when trying to discern the sacredness or profanity

of the natural world, humanity's proper place in creation, as well as its relationship with the rest of the Earth community. The stark realities of the interconnected social and ecological crises that threaten any future flourishing on this planet demand that such ambiguity be resolved in favour of the mutually enhancing co-existence of humans with the rest of creation. To prevent humanity from proceeding along a path that might lead to an anthropogenic Earth-system collapse, a more integrated response is required. A biocentric ecospirituality can contribute to this essential redirection of the summative effects of human endeavour. Similarly, a contextually revised CST, marked by a deeper appreciation of the epic of evolution and offering a theological anthropology that is more ecologically sensitive, can more effectively identify the social, political, economic, and ecological practices responsible for increasing the suffering and diminishing the flourishing of humans and the rest of creation.

Given the diverse knowledge and complex competences required to address the issues of today, it is reasonable to assume that the teaching offices of the Catholic Church would need to consult and dialogue with experts in many fields and holding various perspectives. Even though recent magisterial documents have shown a nascent appreciation of ecological issues, more consultation and dialogue with experts in ecotheology and ecospirituality would undoubtedly support further advancement in this critical area. Doing so would arguably assist the Vatican's efforts to articulate a more ecologically appropriate theological anthropology, and could provide new insight into persistent issues related to anthropocentrism, hierarchical structures, and the need for gender equity. As demonstrated above, a deeper appreciation of the epic of evolution and biocentrism, when combined with authoritative voices from within the tradition, can calm fears associated with emerging Catholic ecospiritualities and provide a richer understanding of established doctrine.

A revised CST, renewed through the integration of an ecological spirituality and biocratic perspective, can assist the papal magisterial office on the path of a more effectively contribution to the creative functioning and flourishing of the entire Earth community under genuine conditions of substantive peace and justice. Such an integral greening is increasingly proving to be an essential choice in so many human endeavours, because as Berry puts it in a nutshell, "[t]here is no way that the human project can succeed if the earth project fails" ("Christianity's Role in the Earth Project" 127).

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