

## WHY CATHOLICS AREN'T ENVIRONMENTALISTS (OF A CERTAIN SORT)

### THE ECOLOGICAL VISION OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

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**Thesis.** In contrast to an environmentalism that separates the nature it sees to preserve and protect from the human, Catholic social teaching recasts environmentalism in light of the doctrine of creation through an integral ecology, integrating our care for the earth and for one another into our love of God.

**Outline.** Three parts: (1) Catholic social teaching's account of creation care (as integral ecology) & some distinguishing features; (2) historical emergence of this account (with a focus on agriculture); (3) practical implications & affinities with environmentalism of the poor

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If the vision of creation is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or ... abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation. —Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), §48

“Environment” means that which surrounds or encircles us; it means a world separate from ourselves, outside us. ... [But] the world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. It is also a Creation ... —Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community* (1992)

Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), §66

The Lord, who is the first to care for us, teaches us to care for our brothers and sisters and the environment which he daily gives us. This is the first ecology that we need.

—Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), §41

The biblical texts ... tell us to “till and keep” the garden of the world (cf. *Gen* 2:15). “Tilling” refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. —Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), §67

The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is ... “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order.” —Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), §93

Nature is at our disposal not as “a heap of scattered refuse” but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling [us] to draw from it the principles needed in order “to till it and keep it” (*Gen* 2:15). ... [T]he natural environment ... is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation.

—Pope Benedict, *Caritas in Veritate* (2008), §48

It is hard for us to accept that the way natural ecosystems work is exemplary ... We have not yet managed to adopt a circular model of production capable of preserving resources for present and future generations, while limiting as much as possible the use of non-renewable resources, moderating their consumption, maximizing their efficient use, reusing and recycling them.

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), §22

[A] true ecological approach *always* becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*. —Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), §49

The law ... should favour ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible ... to become owners. ... If working people can be encouraged to look forward to obtaining a share in the land, the consequence will be that the gulf between vast wealth and sheer poverty will be bridged over .... Men always work harder and more readily when they work on that which belongs to them; nay, they learn to love the very soil that yields in response to the labour of their hands ...

—Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), §§46-47

Do you forget that there was a heavy dividend for the men who destroyed the wealth of the American forests with the rip-saw? I was told of a man in Sussex who made it pay to ruin the weald with his pigs. It paid him; but it did not pay Sussex. It paid the timber merchants to ruin the American forests; but it did not pay America. —Vincent McNabb, *The Church and the Land* (1925)

To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment ... would result in the demolition of society. ... Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighbourhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, the power to produce food ... destroyed. —Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation* (1944)

Such unbounded exploitation of the true value of the human person usually keeps pace with the exploitation of natural goods, especially of the soil; and sooner or later it leads to decline. —Pope Pius XII, *Address to the College of Cardinals* (1948)

There has been too much experimentation with mass production, with the exploitation, to the point of exhaustion, of every resource of the soil and subsoil.

—Pope Pius, *Address for the Catholic International Congress* (1950)

I thank you—you who suffer exclusion and inequality in flesh—for accepting the invitation to discuss the many very serious social problems that afflict the world today. ... This meeting of grassroots movements is a sign, it is a great sign, for you have brought a reality that is often silenced into the presence of God, the Church and all peoples. The poor not only suffer injustice, they also struggle against it! —Pope Francis, *Address to World Meeting of Popular Movements* (2014)

The principle that informs these rights [to agrarian reform and ecological health] is the right to life. [W]e cannot defend a right to agrarian reform without respecting the environment, and we cannot defend and protect the environment without considering the agrarian and social aspects relative to land use. —R.B. Furriela, *Presentation at MST workshop for Lawyers* (2000)