Introduction

In the light of growing environmental concerns we are witnessing an integration of ecology into the fabric of Catholic social thought. Catholic social teaching (CST) has traditionally focused on economic and social development, encompassing issues related to human work, the economy, peace, human rights, the family and national and international political development. In the light of the ecological crisis, that focus is now expanding.

The cry of the earth and the cry of the poor

The 2004 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church dedicated Chapter 10 to “Safeguarding the Environment.” Emerging from this reflection is the conclusion that “the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one.” In the 1990 World Day of Peace message, ‘Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation,’ John Paul II states that “the proper ecological balance will not be found without directly addressing the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world.” (11). In a 2003 ecology statement, the Canadian Bishops amplify this papal concern by stating that “ecological harmony cannot exist in a world of unjust social structures; nor can the extreme social inequalities of our current world order result in ecological sustainability.” (You love all that exists … all things are Yours, God, Lover of Life, 17). In other words, economy and ecology (and culture) must be addressed in a seamless, holistic fashion in a manner that is ultimately rooted in the incarnate and glorious Jesus Christ.

John Paul II’s 1990 World Day of Peace Message ‘Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation’ was the first comprehensive Papal document dedicated solely to ecology and has been widely influential. Marjorie Keenan’s, RSHM book ‘From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment 1972-2002’ is the first attempt to collate papal concern for the environment beginning in the early years after Vatican II.

A rich tradition of Episcopal teaching on ecology and human development has developed over the past three decades. In response to pressing socio-ecological issues, individual bishops or national conferences of bishops have issued pastoral letters on ecology and development (See overleaf). Many of these documents are generally inaccessible and have not been given the attention they deserve. A compilation of the more than 40 documents on ecology issued by the Catholic episcopacy to date does not exist. The volume “And God Saw That It Was Good”: Catholic Theology and the Environment published by the United States Catholic Conference in 1996 contains pastoral letters from the bishops of the United States, Australia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Northern Italy and the Philippines.

Current state of teaching

The following environmental principles constitute contemporary Catholic social teaching on the environment:3

- Human life and dignity must remain at the forefront of any consideration of environmental questions.
- Stewardship is the appropriate model for human care for the environment.
- Obligations to future generations must influence environmental decision-making.
- In the spirit of subsidiarity, environmental decision-making must be made at the appropriate level.
- The right to private property and the mandate to use property for the common good must both be respected in environmental policies.
- Environmental concerns are also moral concerns which require radical rethinking of our consumer culture.

Documents on Catholic Social Teaching and Ecology

1975. This Land is Home to me. Appalachian Catholic Bishops.


1991. The Earth is our Home. Pastoral Message by Bishop D. Pfeifer, OMI of San Angelo Diocese, Texas.


1995. At Home in the Web of Life: A Pastoral Letter on Sustainable Communities in Appalachia Celebrating the 20th Anniversary of This Land is Home to Me from the Catholic Bishops of Appalachia.


2003. You love all that exists ... all things are Yours, God, love of life" A Pastoral Letter on the Christian Ecological Imperative from the Social Affairs Commission, Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.


2006. Remove the sandals from your feet ... you are standing On Holy Ground: An Ecological Vision for Catholic Education in New South Wales. Catholic Earthcare Australia. With Greetings from Bishop Christopher Toohey. Chair of Bishops’ Commission for Justice and Service.


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