

Chronology of Catholic Teachings on the Environment Prior to Pope Francis

In a matter of weeks, Pope Francis will release his encyclical on the environment. It should not be surprising that he would lend the authority of his office to the great environmental challenge of our age, because several Popes have written about environmental issues, and quite a large body of teachings has preceded him. Also, the Pope has expressed himself frequently on this subject. Yet efforts are already underway to discredit the document before it is released, claiming that it is too radical and/or political.

Consider these examples:

1. Catholic environmentalist theology is centered on the biblical creation story in the book of Genesis, where God created the world, declared it “good,” and charged humanity with its care.
2. In 1963, Pope John XXIII, in the encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, “emphasized the world's growing interdependence. He saw problems emerging, which the traditional political mechanisms could no longer address, and he extended the traditional principle of the common good from the nation-state to the world community.” [1]
3. Pope Paul VI was the first pope to address the issue in 1972 in a statement to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, called “*A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations*.” He wrote: “But how can we ignore the imbalances caused in the biosphere by the disorderly exploitation of the physical reserves of the planet, even for the purpose of producing something useful, such as the wasting of natural resources that cannot be renewed; pollution of the earth, water, the air and space, with the resulting attacks on vegetable and animal life? All that contributes to the impoverishment and deterioration of man's environment to the extent, it is said, of threatening his own survival. Finally, our generation must energetically accept the challenge of going beyond partial and immediate aims to prepare a hospitable earth for future generations.” [2]
4. In his 1990 World Day of Peace Message, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone. . . . When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely, that there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations. I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue. Even men and women without any particular religious conviction, but with an acute sense of their responsibilities for the common good, recognize their obligation to contribute to the restoration of a healthy environment. All the more should men and women who believe in God the Creator, and who are thus convinced that there is a well-defined unity and order in the world, feel called to address the problem.”
5. In his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II writes: “Although people are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic 'human

ecology'." (Section 38) He adds: "It is the task of the State to provide for the defence and preservation of common goods such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces." (Section 40)

6. In his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI, wrote: "Today the subject of development is also closely related to the duties arising from our relationship to the natural environment. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation." (Section 48)

7. In the message of Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January, 2010, he writes: "Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of 'environmental refugees', people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it – and often their possessions as well – in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources? All these are issues with a profound impact on the exercise of human rights, such as the right to life, food, health and development."

Finally, consider what we already know about the environmental thinking of Pope Francis. Since his election in March, 2013, the Pope has made many appeals in defense of the environment. Speaking to a large crowd in Rome last May, he said, "Safeguard Creation, because if we destroy Creation, Creation will destroy us! Never forget this!" [3] We expect that the Pope's message will state clearly that concerns about the environment represent "one of the greatest challenges of our time," and he will warn us that failure to care for the planet risks dire consequences.

Prepared by the St. Thomas Aquinas Green Committee.

Sources:

[1] *Renewing the Earth, An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching, A Pastoral Statement of the United States Catholic Conference. November 14, 1991.*

[2] Message to the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment, June 1, 1972.

[3] *Pope Francis Makes Biblical Case For Addressing Climate Change: 'If We Destroy Creation, Creation Will Destroy Us,'* Jack Jenkins, Climate Progress, posted on May 21, 2014.