

The Christological Ecology of Joseph Ratzinger

Pope Benedict XVI established himself as an untiring champion of the environment during his papacy. This image of the *Green Pope* unfolded gradually, as his speeches and homilies made their way into the media, and many started noticing his repeated exhortations for proper care of all of creation.¹ Benedict, though, was not riding some green trend to boost his popularity. What many do not know is that Joseph Ratzinger, as a theologian, had already written extensively on the subject of eco-theology although he might never have used that term, one which started being used only during the later years of the twentieth century.

Ratzinger's theology does not focus on one subject area to the exclusion of other theological topics. As a theologian he is widely published, and one can see how, throughout his academic career, which he continued to pursue even during the years he served as Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, he seeks to engage with theological issues that he feels need to be addressed as they arise. He does this in a two-fold manner. He engages in dialogue with the rest of the world about the Catholic faith, while at the same time he roots his theology in truth and insists that that truth be upheld all the time. For him, that truth is revealed in Jesus Christ, and Christ's figure is central to all of his theology.

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¹ Benedict XVI, *The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology*, ed. Maria Milvia Morciano (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

The encounter with Jesus Christ is, for Joseph Ratzinger, both a theological method as well as an indispensable key to understand his eco-theology. In his work *Truth and Tolerance*, he underlines that Christianity “is not simply a network of institutions and ideas we have to hand on but a seeking ever in faith for faith’s inmost depth, for the real encounter with Christ.”² The fact that Jesus Christ is the *Logos*, the Word of God made flesh like every other human being, means that Christ is both the bridge between humanity and God but, at the same time, he is also the Creator, who becomes one with the created. This should be a central theme in all Christian eco-theology because faith depends on Christology. The truths about the Incarnation, the death on the Cross for our Salvation, and the Resurrection, inform all of theology. This paper seeks to show how they cannot be excluded from a study of ecological theology.

What does Christology have to do with ecological theology? In her book on eco-theology, Celia Deane-Drummond dedicates a chapter on the topic of ecology and Christology and argues that if Christianity is to engage radically with ecological issues it cannot do this without any reference to Christ. She notes that:

It is surprising, perhaps, that while the literature on eco-theology has proliferated in the last half century, there is a relative lack of sustained focus on the relationship between ecology (or evolution more generally, for that matter) and Christology. Given the central importance of Christ for Christian belief and practice, this might seem odd, especially given both the varied cultural interpretations of the significance of Christ and the preoccupation of present culture with environmental issues.³

Deane-Drummond insists that stopping at the tenet of God as Creator is not enough for eco-theology because these beliefs could be seen by many as vague and thus easily side-lined or dismissed during ecological debates. She notes that “different facets of Christological reflection”⁴ are needed to link a Christian faith with ecological concern.

Throughout his works, both before and during his pontificate, Ratzinger made reference to eco-theological arguments linked to the Incarnation, Wisdom

² Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 54. In a similar vein, one might also consider reading Denis Edwards, *Jesus and the Cosmos* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) as well as Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008).

³ Celia Deane-Drummond, *Eco-Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 99. See also, Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Ecotheology: Theology for a Fragile Earth* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Companions Book, 2018).

⁴ *Ibid.*

Christology, Cosmic Christology, and how it is through Jesus Christ that humanity can develop a truly integral human ecology. The beliefs in salvation and redemption through Christ will also be dealt with in this paper, especially because eschatology is either ignored by certain eco-theologians or else dismissed as not ecological because it pertains only to humanity and does not encompass all of creation. Ratzinger, instead, has more than once shown that redemption and salvation through Christ is cosmic and that all of creation is renewed through Him.

This paper proceeds in four steps. Firstly, it delves into the links between Christology and creation theology. Secondly, it explains Wisdom Christology by highlighting God's creation of the world. Thirdly, reference is made to Cosmic Christology while underlining the relation between the cosmos, and all of creation, with Christ. Fourthly, follows an analysis on the concept of an "integral human ecology." Harmony with nature is secured when harmony amongst people is in place. Christ and Christian love restore this balance. In conclusion, Benedict's argument is that only through an orientation towards Christ can true progress be achieved, both for humanity and for the rest of creation. Christ is the way.

Incarnational Eco-theology

Benedict highlights the links between Christology and creation theology during the General Audience of the 9th of January 2013. He first quotes both Ignatius of Antioch and Irenaeus on the meaning of the Incarnation and explains that:

The word 'flesh,' according to the Hebrew usage, indicates man in his whole self, the whole man, but in particular in the dimension of his transience and his temporality, his poverty and his contingency. This was in order to communicate to us that the salvation brought by God, who became man in Jesus of Nazareth, affects man in his material reality and in whatever situation he may be.⁵

Benedict stresses the wonder of the Incarnation by also quoting from the Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et spes* (n. 22) which reaffirmed that when Jesus Christ became man he was fully human as much as any one of us is, except for sin. Jesus worked, created, and thought like a human. Because the *Logos* is born as a human child it means that God does not intervene in the history of humanity through power or sovereignty, but in the most humble of ways, by presenting himself as a vulnerable infant.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (9 January 2013), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20130109.html (accessed on 14 September 2021).

Several times Benedict has asked Christians to contemplate the Incarnation with a sense of wonder. One of these episodes was during a General Audience which he dedicated to the teachings of John Duns Scotus, and during which he spoke of a Christocentric worldview that puts Christ not only at the centre of history but, also, at the centre of the cosmos. His exhortation was that: “this strongly ‘Christocentric’ theological vision opens us to contemplation, wonder and gratitude: Christ is the centre of history and of the cosmos, it is he who gives meaning, dignity and value to our lives.”⁶ When speaking of Duns Scotus, Benedict highlights an important theological tenet about the Incarnation that was formulated by this Scottish, thirteenth century Franciscan – the argument that Christ did not become man because of the fall but, instead, that the Incarnation was predestined before time. He explains that:

This perhaps somewhat surprising thought crystallized because, in the opinion of Duns Scotus the Incarnation of the Son of God, planned from all eternity by God the Father at the level of love is the fulfilment of creation and enables every creature, in Christ and through Christ, to be filled with grace and to praise and glorify God in eternity. Although Duns Scotus was aware that in fact, because of original sin, Christ redeemed us with his Passion, Death and Resurrection, he reaffirmed that the Incarnation is the greatest and most beautiful work of the entire history of salvation, that it is not conditioned by any contingent fact but is God’s original idea of ultimately uniting with himself the whole of creation, in the Person and Flesh of the Son.⁷

This thought is the fulcrum of *Incarnational eco-theology*. By quoting Scotus, Benedict is emphasizing that the love that lies between the Creator and His creation encompasses all of the cosmos and should not be reduced to a relationship that is solely between God and humanity. Dawn Nothwehr OSF notes in her book *Ecological Footprints* that John Duns Scotus was a realist who “accepted that reality includes the natural environment – its physical nature, its vegetative and animal life – as well as good and evil, virtue and sin, the angelic and the demonic.”⁸ His interest was in assessing what kind of relation existed between God and such a diverse creation. Nothwehr, just like Benedict,

⁶ Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (7 July 2010), https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100707.html (accessed on 14 September 2021).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dawn M. Nothwehr, *Ecological Footprints: An Essential Franciscan Guide for Faith and Sustainable Living* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 131. Since April of 2015, Dawn Nothwehr has served as a consultant on the implementation of Pope Francis’ environmental encyclical, *Laudato si’*.

underlines the fundamental importance of Scotus's theology of the Incarnation and his understanding that "the Word would have become incarnate even if *Adam* had not sinned."⁹ Nothwehr explains that, for Scotus, the relationship between Creator and creation is primarily one of love. In this one detects echoes of Benedict's repeated teachings that God did not only create *ex-nihilo*, but also out of love and this love is found fulfilled, first and foremost, in the Word made flesh – in Jesus Christ. Nothwehr stresses that according to Scotus:

Humans were not only created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*); they were also created in the image of the incarnate Son (*imago Christi*). Just as Bonaventure taught, Scotus also sees Christ as the pattern after which all creation is fashioned. Like the Seraphic Doctor, Bonaventure, the Subtle Doctor holds that progress in the spiritual life is a process of *christification* as well as *deification*; the more Christ-like one becomes, the more God-like one is. Indeed, human union with God is mediated (made possible) through the incarnation.¹⁰

Another aspect of Incarnational theology that is intrinsically linked with eco-theology is the argument that if the Incarnation was willed by God as an outpouring of love for all of creation, then one needs to rule out any arguments that conclude that creation is merely a product of chance. In his encyclical *Spe salvi*, Benedict explores the theme of the Incarnation in light of the arguments of "randomness" and "chance" and notes that the belief that God becomes flesh contradicts the idea of humanity controlled by the universe. To support his argument he quotes from Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians* in which the life according to Christ and the life "under the dominion of the elemental spirits of the universe" are contrasted. The latter life would imply a complete lack of freedom for humanity, at the mercy of the random influence of the elements. With the Incarnation, instead, there is a humanity that is oriented towards Christ. Benedict also draws inspiration from the work of Gregory Nazianzen on the birth of Christ, specifically the episode of the Magi. He explains that:

In this regard a text by Saint Gregory Nazianzen is enlightening. He says that at the very moment when the Magi, guided by the star, adored Christ the new king, astrology came to an end, because the stars were now moving in the orbit determined by Christ. This scene, in fact, overturns the world-view of that time, which in a different way has become fashionable once again today. It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason,

⁹ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰ Ibid.

will, love - a Person. And if we know this Person and he knows us, then truly the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the last word; we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws, we are free. In ancient times, honest enquiring minds were aware of this. Heaven is not empty. Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love.¹¹

If through the Incarnation God is revealing Himself through Jesus Christ, then this translates also into belief in Jesus Christ's consubstantiality with the Father. This is relevant to eco-theology from the perspective of Cosmic Christology and Wisdom Christology, both arguments that link Christ with the entire cosmos, both human and non-human.¹²

Wisdom Christology

God's creation of the world is a theme that is not only found in the book of Genesis, but continues to recur throughout Scripture. Especially in the Old Testament one finds the concept that Wisdom not only accompanied the act of creation, but existed before creation. Wisdom Christology recognises Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God's Wisdom, the one who pre-existed the world but who became flesh. Benedict XVI dedicated a series of Wednesday General Audiences to catechesis on Saint Paul.¹³ In one of the audiences he points out how Paul recognised that Christ's suffering and resurrection reflected his human dimension while at the same time his divine dimension remained, going back "to that eternal existence in which he is wholly one with the Father."¹⁴ Benedict explains that, according to Saint Paul, Christ's descent in the Incarnation had already been announced in the Old Testament through the sapiential books, including the Psalms and the Book of Wisdom. His argument, then, is that Paul developed his Wisdom Christology by linking Christ to what is found in these sapiential books:

Saint Paul, in developing his Christology, refers precisely to this sapiential perspective: in Jesus he recognises the eternal wisdom that has always existed, the wisdom that descends and pitches a tent for herself among us and thus he can describe Christ as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical on Christian Hope *Spe salvi* (30 November 2007), 5.

¹² On these lines, one might also see Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995) and a more recent publication of his: *The Natural World and God: Theological Explorations* (Hindmarsh, South Australia: ATF Press, 2017).

¹³ These General Audiences took place between the 2nd July 2008 and 4th February 2009.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Paul of Tarsus* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2009), 67.

1:24), he can say that Christ has become, through God's work, "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption."¹⁵

How is Wisdom Christology connected to ecological theology? One theologian who makes this direct connection is Denis Edwards, especially in his book *Jesus the Wisdom of God*. In this book, Edwards develops the same ideas expressed by Benedict and he even uses the same terminology when he describes Wisdom as pitching a tent on earth in the figure of Jesus Christ. He notes how, in Scripture:

Wisdom is always closely associated with God's work of creation. Wisdom is concerned with the whole of creation, and with the interrelationships among human beings, the rest of creation and God. It is *this* Wisdom, radically associated with creation and with all creatures, who pitches a tent among us in Jesus of Nazareth. It is because Wisdom Christology is a creation theology, a cosmic theology, and a relational theology, that it can come to be understood, in our time, as an ecological theology.¹⁶

Through Wisdom Christology, one must then move into Cosmic Christology. While *Wisdom Christology* is the Word that becomes flesh and lives among humanity, *Cosmic Christology* is where creation starts and where it ultimately returns.

Cosmic Christology

Joseph Ratzinger insists against the separation of the "Jesus of history" from the "Christ of faith." Those who focus on the human nature of Jesus are often described as doing Christology "from below," yet an undue emphasis on the human figure of Jesus detracts from his divinity and his salvific mission. It reduces Jesus Christ to a mere mortal, admittedly one greatly to be admired by the rest of humanity for his teachings and his exemplary life, but completely cut off from his divine nature. Ratzinger speaks of the dangers of creating this gap between the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith" in his foreword to his book *Jesus of Nazareth*.¹⁷ Celia Deane-Drummond similarly argues that:

One of the disadvantages of any Christology 'from below' - that is, one that focuses on the significance of the *human* personhood of Jesus - is that it tends

¹⁵ Ibid., 68.

¹⁶ Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 19.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), xi.

to address the *human* nature of Jesus in a way that could detract from the wider significance of the incarnation as being embodied ‘in the flesh.’¹⁸

In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Benedict explains the cosmic dimension of the *logos* by referring to a number of scriptural passages but, most especially, to the Christological hymn found in Colossians 1: 15-20. He notes that through these passages Scripture shows us that:

Everything that exists does not exist by chance but is willed by God and part of his plan, at whose centre is the invitation to partake, in Christ, in the divine life. Creation is born of the *Logos* and indelibly bears the mark of the *creative Reason which orders and directs it...* Thus Sacred Scripture itself invites us to acknowledge the Creator by contemplating his creation. The tradition of Christian thought has developed this key element of the symphony of the word, as when, for example, Saint Bonaventure, who in the great tradition of the Greek Fathers sees all the possibilities of creation present in the *Logos*, states that “every creature is a word of God, since it proclaims God. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* synthesized this datum when it stated that “God, who creates and conserves all things by his word, provides constant evidence of himself in created realities.”¹⁹

In his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ratzinger also explains the relation between the cosmos, and all of creation, with Christ. The connection he makes is both with the Incarnation and with the death on the Cross. He states that:

The decisive factor was the connection of creation and Cross, of creation and Christ’s conception. In the light of the ‘hour of Jesus,’ these dates brought the cosmos into the picture. The cosmos was now thought of as the pre-annunciation of Christ, the Firstborn of creation. It is he of whom creation speaks, and it is by him that its mute message is deciphered. The cosmos finds its true meaning in the Firstborn of creation, who has now entered history. From him comes the assurance that the adventure of creation, of a world with its own free existence distinct from God, does not end up in absurdity and tragedy but, throughout all its calamities and upheavals, remains something positive.²⁰

The argument here is that all of creation is “destined to be ‘recapitulated’ in Christ at the end of time.”²¹ One already finds this argument discussed at length in Ratzinger’s book *In the Beginning*, where he develops this topic as part of creation theology. Here he argues that in the New Testament, Christ is the definitive Adam

¹⁸ Deane-Drummond, *Eco-theology*, 100.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Word of the Lord *Verbum Domini*, 8.

²⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 108.

²¹ Benedict XVI, Encyclical on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), 48.

and the definitive Image of God. Ratzinger also sees in Christ the only model that all of humanity should aspire to and the only figure that answers truly the question of what the human being is.²² This argument is fleshed out and explained in more beautiful language in *Verbum Domini* where Benedict XVI says:

Calling to mind these essential elements of our faith, we can contemplate the profound unity in Christ between creation, the new creation, and all salvation history. To use an example, we can compare the cosmos to a “book” - Galileo himself used this example - and consider it as the work of an author who expresses himself through the ‘symphony’ of creation. In this symphony one finds, at a certain point, what would be called in musical terms a ‘solo’, a theme entrusted to a single instrument or voice which is so important that the meaning of the entire work depends on it. This ‘solo’ is Jesus... The son of Man recapitulates in himself earth and heaven, creation and the Creator, flesh and Spirit. He is the center of the cosmos and of history, for in him converge without confusion the author and his work.²³

If one were to translate these words into an image, the most apt illustration would be the apse of the Basilica of Saint Clement in Rome. The ancient mosaic depicts, in exquisite detail, nature’s recapitulation in Christ. It is the crucified Christ who stands as the Tree of Life and from whom the branches of life extend to sustain all created forms. This mosaic is built in a way that shows both Christ crucified and Christ glorified, through whom all of creation flows. For Ratzinger, there is an intrinsic link between Christ as the Tree of Life and the Eucharist. In one of the Carinthian lectures, he speaks of the Eucharist as the perennial Tree of Life. He notes how, in receiving the Eucharist, one enters the dynamic by which the story of Creation and the story of Adam is transformed. It also shows that the crucified Christ, in his actions, shows obedience to creation and the Creator.²⁴

This idea that all of creation is recapitulated in Christ is also found in the Liturgy, specifically in the presentation of the gifts, in the Offertory, and at

²² Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 48.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 13.

²⁴ Benedict XVI and Giuseppe Tanzella Nitti, *Progetto di Dio: meditazioni sulla creazione e la Chiesa* (Venezia: Marcianum Press, 2012), 119-120: “Pertanto l’eucaristia è, come attualità della croce, il perenne albero della vita, il quale è accessibile; in ogni tempo è nel nostro centro e in ogni tempo c’invita a ricevere il frutto della vera vita. Ma questo naturalmente fa vedere, al contrario, l’enorme grandezza e drammaticità dell’eucaristia. Mostra che l’eucaristia non può mai essere semplicemente una qualche sorta di cura della comunità, bensì riceverla significa invece, per l’appunto, entrare in quella dinamica della trasformazione della storia di Adamo, mangiare dell’albero della vita e ciò significa ricevere il Signore crocifisso, la sua forma di vita, la sua obbedienza e la sua obbedienza all’essere, alla creazione ed al Creatore.”

the moment of Consecration. In the Post Synodal Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, Benedict draws attention to the fact that the presentation of the gifts is not simply an “interval” between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. This would water down an important aspect of the Mass. For Benedict, the Offertory is a “humble and simple gesture” that has great significance. He explains how all of creation together with all of humanity’s creative effort as well as all of humanity’s pain and suffering is taken up to the Lord at this moment. He says that:

In the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. In this way we also bring to the altar all the pain and suffering of the world, in the certainty that everything has value in God’s eyes... God invites man to participate in bringing to fulfilment his handiwork, and in so doing, gives human labour its authentic meaning, since, through the celebration of the Eucharist, it is united to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.²⁵

When speaking of the cosmic element of the Eucharist, one finds that Benedict refers a number of times to the ideas penned by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Even before his election to the pontificate, in his work *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, he wrote about the cosmic nature of both the Incarnation and the transubstantiation that happens during Mass by quoting Teilhard’s concept of the Noosphere. He explains that:

Invoking the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, Teilhard looks on Christ as the energy that strives toward the Noosphere and finally incorporates everything in its “fullness”. From here Teilhard went on to give a new meaning to Christian worship: the transubstantiated Host is the anticipation of the transformation and divinization of matter in the Christological “fullness”. In his view, the Eucharist provides the movement of the cosmos with its direction; it anticipates its goal and at the same time urges it on.²⁶

As pope, Benedict also quoted Teilhard de Chardin’s vision of how the cosmos will one day become a living host, of the cosmos itself becoming a liturgy. He spoke these words in a homily at the Cathedral of Aosta in 2009, where he specifically directs his words at priests by saying that through their ministry they are to consecrate the world, and in so doing aid in this transformation of the whole world.²⁷

²⁵ Benedict XVI, Post Synodal Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church’s Life and Mission *Sacramentum caritatis* (22 February 2007), 47.

²⁶ Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 29.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Celebration of Vespers with the Faithful of Aosta* (24 July 2009),

One of the important roles of eco-theology is a correct interpretation of Cosmic Christology. Throughout the twentieth century, especially, there were different approaches to the figure of a Cosmic Christ and his relation to the non-human cosmos, and some of these differed greatly from Catholic truths. If one wants to use an ecological metaphor, one could say that in theology such beliefs are as dangerous as quicksand. These questionable approaches are especially evident in the flourishing of *New Age* ideologies. In 2003, the Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue issued a document entitled *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life - A Christian Reflection on the "New Age"*.²⁸ This study highlighted the problem with the New Age image of the Cosmic Christ which sees Christ as a paradigm or a pattern "which can be repeated in many people, places and times; it is the bearer of an enormous paradigm shift; it is ultimately a potential within us."²⁹ In opposition to the *New Age* beliefs, the document seeks to underline and to explain extensively what true Christian belief in Jesus Christ is. It states that:

According to Christian belief, Jesus Christ is not a pattern, but a divine person whose human-divine figure reveals the mystery of the Father's love for every person throughout history (*Jn* 3,16); he lives in us because he shares his life with us, but it is neither imposed nor automatic. All men and women are invited to share his life, to live 'in Christ'.³⁰

Joseph Ratzinger warns against this type of warped Christology in *Truth and Tolerance*. He stresses that Jesus Christ can never be seen as a paradigm, one of several great human beings who, while still on earth, was simply an example of orthopraxis. Instead, Ratzinger underlines the importance of the statement in the Creed that Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with the Father and reminds that, although historically there were those within the Church who tried to water down the meaning of consubstantiality and even some who considered it a scandal, the Church ultimately retained it. In *Truth and Tolerance*, he uses the term avatar to describe what Christ is not and cannot be reduced to. He stresses that:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090724-vespri-aosta.html (accessed on 14 September 2021).

²⁸ Pontifical Council for Culture, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life* (3 February, 2003), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_interelg_doc_20030203_new-age_en.html (accessed on 14 September 2021).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

The uniqueness of Christ is directly related to the uniqueness of God and to the concrete form of this. Christ is not an avatar of God, perhaps an especially impressive one, one of the multifarious finite manifestations of the divine, in which we learn to have some inkling of the divine. He is not a “manifestation” of the divine but *is* God. In him, God has shown his face. Anyone who sees him has seen the Father (Jn 14:9).³¹

Christology and Integral Human Ecology

The term “human ecology” was used by Pope St John Paul II during a General Audience address delivered in 2001. He noted that when one speaks of stewardship and care of creation one must mean both harmony with nature as well as harmony amongst people. He stated that:

At stake, then, is not only a ‘physical’ ecology that is concerned to safeguard the habitat of the various living beings, but also a “human” ecology which makes the existence of creatures more dignified, by protecting the fundamental good of life in all its manifestations and by preparing for future generations an environment more in conformity with the Creator’s plan.³²

Throughout Benedict’s work one sees how the themes of Christology and love are kept paramount, and how these inform his thoughts on human ecology. In *Light of the World* he tells Peter Seewald that:

Two themes have always accompanied me in my life, then: on the one hand, the theme of Christ, as the living present God, the God who loves us and heals us through suffering, and, on the other hand, the theme of love, which for its part occupies a central place in Johannine theology - because I knew that love is the key to Christianity, that love is the angle from which it has to be approached. Which is why I also wrote the first encyclical from the point of view of this key.³³

It is also why, in *Caritas in veritate* he states that “Love is revealed and made present by Christ.”³⁴ In Jesus Christ there is God who becomes fully human while remaining fully divine and this happens because of God’s love for creation. For Benedict, this leads directly to one predominant characteristic of human ecology:

³¹ Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 104.

³² John Paul II, *General Audience* (17 January 2001), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/audiences/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_20010117.html (accessed on 14 September 2021). See also Marybeth Lorbiecki, *Following St. Francis: John Paul II’s Call for Ecological Action* (New York: Random House, Rizzoli Ex Libris, 2014).

³³ Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 102.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 5.

the importance of unity of body and soul. The person is not integral unless both the body and the soul are taken as inseparable. In *Deus caritas est*, Benedict acknowledges that in those instances in the past, where the Church denied the body as negative matter, and juxtaposed it against the soul, this was the wrong approach. He admits that “nowadays Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed.”³⁵ He warns, though, that today’s opposite tendency, to exalt the body, is also flawed. The person is no longer seen in totality, but as “pure sex,” and this in turn renders the human being a commodity, to be bought and sold. He notes that:

Here we are actually dealing with a debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere. The apparent exaltation of the body can quickly turn into a hatred of bodiliness.³⁶

Instead, Benedict presents the argument that true *eros*, although starting from the self, will move towards the other not in a “searching” manner, but in an experience that “involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier.”³⁷ This journey with the other helps love to grow and to desire not only one’s happiness but, above all, the happiness of the other. This journey will encompass an element of self-giving which will in turn bring both true self-knowledge and knowledge of God. It is here that Benedict makes the link with Christ. It is Christ who taught humanity that it is the seed that falls and dies that is the seed that will bear much fruit, and also that “whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it.”³⁸ If Jesus Christ had limited himself to these teachings he would have been nothing more than a great Rabbi. In Christ, though, one has the ultimate path of self-giving: through the Cross to the Resurrection, and Benedict notes how Christ, “Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfilment therein ... also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.”³⁹ True love entails reciprocity. To love others one needs to be constantly open to receive God’s love in one’s life. When in *Deus caritas est* Benedict speaks of the importance of giving love he also balances this with the equally important action of receiving love as a gift. He says that:

³⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus caritas est* (25 December 2005), 5.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 6.

³⁸ Lk 17:33; Matt 10:39.

³⁹ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 6.

Man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift ... one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God.⁴⁰

Throughout the gospels, Christ's teachings are about love. They are about God's love for humanity, and humanity's love for God, and the love that people should show each other. The element of love is essential in the study of eco-theology. Without a clear understanding of what Christian love means humanity cannot love the way it is called to do. Another part of *Deus caritas est* is dedicated to love of neighbour. According to Benedict, through his teachings, Jesus widened the definition of neighbour and at the same time made the command of love less vague and requiring of commitment. Benedict shows this through an exegesis of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus⁴¹ and the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁴² Benedict says that through Christ's teachings now:

Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour. The concept of "neighbour" is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now.⁴³

When referring to the parable of the Last Judgement,⁴⁴ Benedict makes the link with the appreciation of the value of human life. He explains how through this parable Jesus identified himself with those of humanity who are destitute and in need. Ignoring these people is equal to ignoring Christ. He states: "Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God."⁴⁵

Integral human ecology also concerns a sense of *development*. How is humanity seen in relation to a continuous and ever increasing demand for technological development? Benedict tackles this issue extensively in *Caritas in veritate* where he underlines that man should not rely solely on himself and on human institutions to bring about development. A fully human and integral development requires also that man transcends himself. In the following quote one sees how Benedict expresses concern over the fact that human beings are so tied to technological progress and development that they are removing

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴¹ Lk 16:19-31.

⁴² Lk 10:25-37.

⁴³ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 15.

⁴⁴ Matt 25: 31-46.

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 15.

transcendence completely out of their life. Development, for him, should never be robbed of this transcendence. He writes that:

Such development requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God: without him, development is either denied, or entrusted exclusively to man, who falls into the trap of thinking he can bring about his own salvation, and ends up promoting a dehumanized form of development. Only through an encounter with God are we able to see in the other something more than just another creature, to recognize the divine image in the other, thus truly coming to discover him or her and to mature in a love that 'becomes concern and care for the other'.⁴⁶

This argument was extensively discussed by Ratzinger in his book *Eschatology*. This book came about as part of Professor Johann Auer's project, in the 1970s, to issue a small, paperback series on dogmatic theology, and Ratzinger was convinced to work on it as co-editor. The book on eschatology ended up being his only contribution as, soon after, he was appointed to succeed Cardinal Julius Döpfner as Archbishop of Munich-Freising in 1976. When he writes about his work on the book on eschatology in his memoirs, Ratzinger says that he considers it as "my most thorough work and the one I laboured over most strenuously."⁴⁷ One finds in this book an in-depth discussion on the modern world's belief in progress and the dangers that lurk when humanity ties its salvation with earthly progress. Ratzinger uses the pericopes in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke that deal with Jesus' temptations in the desert to highlight his arguments. He equates these temptations with the same temptations of earthly power and acquisition that humans grapple with today. According to Ratzinger:

The Messiah of the temptations in the wilderness - the Messiah of human expectation - is defined by his promises of consumer satisfaction and power over others. Anyone who thinks hard about this will realise that here 'the Jews' represent humanity in general. Were we to plan salvation for ourselves and our world it would not be any different. All political propaganda lives off such attitudes of expectation.⁴⁸

Ratzinger shows also how this earth-bound ideology of salvation is nothing more than an attempt of emancipation from God that leads human beings themselves to want to become God. This attitude will have a detrimental effect not only on humanity itself, but also on the rest of creation, on the whole

⁴⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 11.

⁴⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs, 1927-1977* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 150.

⁴⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 61.

cosmos. He notes also that this attitude brings with it a mentality of unrestrained consumption. He says:

Unrestrained consumption shows up the tragic alienation there is between the cosmos and the human species, and between human beings themselves. What seemed a gift becomes a destroying curse. And so the program takes on a more radical colour. Eventually, it turns into a desire for emancipation so total that it is equivalent to asking that men become God. At this point, faith in progress changes over into a dialectic of the negative: emancipation in the sense just outlined presupposes the tearing down of present reality.⁴⁹

One notes here that Ratzinger was quite visionary in his assessment of how the world's consumeristic tendencies were unfolding and the negative impact these were having on creation, both human and non-human.⁵⁰ When later, as Benedict XVI, he issued the encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, he once again tied the damage caused to creation with a lifestyle that is focused on consumerism and hedonism. Here he states that: "The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa."⁵¹ Benedict warns against a lifestyle of individualism that is replacing the idea of the common good. When persons focus on their individual needs and lose sight of the bigger picture it is not only society that is harmed, but the natural environment is devalued to a commodity that is there for the taking. This is why he stresses the need for solidarity and a civic sense in humans. These values will not only build a healthy society, but also protect the environment that society itself needs to flourish. Benedict notes that:

Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society. Nature, especially in our time, is so integrated into the dynamics of society and culture that by now it hardly constitutes an independent variable. Desertification and the decline in productivity in some agricultural areas are also the result of impoverishment and underdevelopment among their inhabitants. When incentives are offered for

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵⁰ This idea is further developed by Pope Francis in his *Laudato si'*, 109: "We have 'a sort of 'superdevelopment' of a wasteful and consumerist kind which forms an unacceptable contrast with the ongoing situations of dehumanizing deprivation,' while we are all too slow in developing economic institutions and social initiatives which can give the poor regular access to basic resources. We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth." See also Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 22; Dermot A. Lane, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue. The Wisdom of Laudato si'* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020).

⁵¹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 51.

their economic and cultural development, nature itself is protected. Moreover, how many natural resources are squandered by wars! Peace in and among peoples would also provide greater protection for nature. The hoarding of resources, especially water, can generate serious conflicts among the peoples involved. Peaceful agreement about the use of resources can protect nature and, at the same time, the well-being of the societies concerned.⁵²

The argument against consumerism found in *Eschatology*, made way back in the seventies, is now extensively developed in his encyclical, no doubt in light of what actually took place in the world within the span of thirty years. The consumerism he spoke about in *Eschatology* is here drawn out in greater detail. This is not simply the consumerism of shopping malls that might at first come to mind. Benedict conjures up pictures of worse excesses such as: the hoarding of resources to the detriment of underdeveloped countries which leads to their impoverishment, the destruction of natural resources because of wars waged, in turn reducing people to poverty, and a desertification of agricultural areas that once were fertile. Here, one might also refer to Benedict's ingenuous metaphor of "external" and "internal" deserts. He says:

There are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.⁵³

Yet, in his encyclical, Benedict places the stress not on the negative but on the positive. He starts not with the problem, but with the answer to the problem. *Caritas in veritate* thus begins with these words:

Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity.⁵⁴

It is in Christ and through Christ that people live harmoniously with one another as human beings, and in peace with creation. In one of his messages for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, Pope Benedict affirmed that If

⁵² Ibid. See, for instance, Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).

⁵³ Benedict XVI, Homily for the Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html (accessed on 14 September 2021).

⁵⁴ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 1.

people want to cultivate peace, then they should protect creation.⁵⁵ He explains that while on the one hand man's inhumanity to man has given rise to numerous threats to peace and to authentic and integral human development, on the other hand, everyone is responsible for the protection and care of the environment and that Education for peace must increasingly begin with far-reaching decisions on the part of individuals, families, communities and states. In this light, Christians have their own contribution to make in the hope that Christ, crucified and risen, there will be "new heavens and a new earth" (2 Pet 3:13), in which justice and peace will dwell for ever.⁵⁶

It is in Christ that they see God's face, and it is through his teachings that they know how to behave according to their vocation here on earth. Throughout the encyclical Benedict underlines several times that the only progress that is beneficial to humans and the rest of the earth is solely that progress that is oriented towards Christ's teachings. He stresses that the values of Christianity must be lived and strengthened because "adhering to the values of Christianity is not merely useful but essential for building a good society and for true integral human development."⁵⁷

In promoting Christ as the solution to a correct development he turns to the teaching of Paul VI in *Populorum progressio*, reminding how "he taught that life in Christ is the first and principal factor of development." Benedict also points out that it was Paul VI who taught that the "Christian faith does not rely on privilege or positions of power ... but only on Christ" for authentic and integral human development.⁵⁸ Benedict has never been against development and progress but has always tied them to an orientation towards Christ if these are to be truly beneficial for humanity and for creation. This is also why he stresses that "*The Gospel is fundamental for development*, because in the Gospel, Christ, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself."⁵⁹ The argument here is that humanity's true potential is fulfilled when it follows Christ and lives according to his teachings as enshrined in the gospels.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (1 January 2010), 1. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliiii-world-day-peace.html (accessed on 14 September 2021).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. On the theme of justice and the need for political and ideological paradigm shifts in relation to globalization, one might see, Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

⁵⁷ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

This orthopraxis will then have a ripple effect on whether the rest of creation flourishes like a well-tended garden or is ravaged by desertification.

Benedict's concerns are that humanity starts placing its hope not in God, but in technological development. Instead, he argues, a true integral human ecology needs God and he develops this argument extensively in his encyclical *Spe salvi*. Here he juxtaposes the "Kingdom of God" as announced by Christ, and the kingdom of man, a kingdom that is accomplished without God and where hope is sought only through reason. Benedict notes, though, that: "man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope."⁶⁰ This hope is tied to how humanity today interprets the concepts of salvation and redemption. When these are sought solely through earthly progress, a progress that seeks complete freedom from dependency on God, they will be sought in science and praxis. According to him, this also brings a new, dangerous, dimension of humanity's dominion over nature. There is no concept of stewardship or care, but instead a justification of nature's dominion by humans at the altar of science and progress. This change in approach towards nature in the modern age is described as "disturbing" by Benedict. He writes that:

Up to that time, the recovery of what man had lost through the expulsion from Paradise was expected from faith in Jesus Christ: herein lay 'redemption.' Now, this 'redemption,' the restoration of the lost 'Paradise' is no longer expected from faith, but from the newly discovered link between science and praxis. It is not that faith is simply denied; rather it is displaced onto another level - that of purely private and other-worldly affairs - and at the same time it becomes somehow irrelevant for the world.⁶¹

Benedict's argument is that only through an orientation towards Christ can true progress be achieved, both for humanity and for the rest of creation. This also means that humanity cannot focus only on how to make life here on earth better, but needs to also take into account its own eschatological dimension. This orientation towards Christ is also an orientation towards the Last Judgement. Christianity does not live only in the present, but looks ahead towards eternal life. A Catholic eco-theology necessitates a correct understanding of salvation and redemption.⁶²

⁶⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 23. The idea of hope in view of the ecological realms of ethics, politics, economics, and education is elegantly developed in Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Crown, 2000).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶² See, for example, Ernst M. Conradie, Sigurd Bergmann, Celia Deane-Drummond, Denis Edwards, *Christian Faith and the Earth: Current Paths and Emerging Horizons in Ecotheology* (London: T&T Clark, 2014).

Conclusion: Christ the Way

If there is one thing that all eco-theologians agree upon, it is the need for an ecological conversion. Both Christians and non-Christians are becoming increasingly aware that the way humanity interacts with nature is determining whether some people are reduced to poverty, whether natural resources are depleted or maintained, and what legacy is being created for future generations. What humanity needs is an eco-theology of *conversion*. For Christians, this *metanoia* can only happen through Christ.

Several theologians who have written on eco-theology have touched at length on the need of ecological conversion. This was also an argument that was strongly pushed by both John Paul II and Bartholomew I in their *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics*. This conversion cannot be simply described as a turn-about though. Just as in the sacrament of reconciliation, a conversion is going to happen only if accompanied by true repentance. This call for true repentance is accompanied by a call for “a genuine conversion in Christ.”⁶³ Lately, Pope Francis has also been insisting on need for an ecological conversion.⁶⁴

In the Gospels, the first encounter with a call for conversion is with the appearance of John the Baptist in the desert. His call anticipates the coming of the Christ and is thus seen as a preparation for those who will eventually follow Christ. In his first volume *Jesus of Nazareth*, Ratzinger also sees this element of conversion as part of John’s baptism of those who were coming to him in the desert. “The goal is truly to leave behind the sinful life one has led until now and to start out on the path to a new, changed life.”⁶⁵ In *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict speaks of *metanoia* in these terms:

The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes *an opportunity for discernment, in which to have a new vision for the future*. In this spirit, with confidence rather than resignation, it is appropriate to address the difficulties of the present time.⁶⁶

⁶³ John Paul II and Bartholomew I, *Common Declaration on Environmental Ethics* (10 June 2002), https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020610_venice-declaration.html (14 September 2021). Of particular interest in this line of thought is the following book: Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, D.C. : Georgetown University Press, 2009).

⁶⁴ Francis, *Care for Creation: A Call for Ecological Conversion*, ed. Giuliano Vignini (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2016).

⁶⁵ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 15.

⁶⁶ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 21; italics original.

The Catholic Church's role is to be the voice that calls repeatedly for an ecological conversion, a conversion that needs to be understood in light of who Jesus Christ is, and how his teachings can be applied to our times of environmental and human crises. Joseph Ratzinger has committed himself to this teaching throughout his life, both as a theologian, a teacher, and also as Pope and in so doing has left the Church a rich eco-theological legacy on which it can continue building.

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