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Benedict XVI's very own shade of green

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 31, 2009 All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI?s track record on the environment already has been robust enough to justify a book-length treatment, *Ten Commandments for the Environment* by Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, in which he?s proclaimed the greenest pope in history. This week brought three additional signals of the pope?s remarkable ecological sensitivity:

- The Vatican announced that the theme of the pope?s annual message for the World Day of Peace is, ?If you want to cultivate peace, take care of creation.? A brief statement asserted that resolving the ?present ecological crisis? is essential to promoting peace in the world, citing environmental threats such as over-use of natural resources and climate change.
- During a vespers service last Friday in northern Italy, Benedict XVI made a brief but unmistakably positive reference to the late Jesuit scientist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, widely considered the patron saint of Catholic ecology. The line prompted speculation in the Italian press about a possible ?rehabilitation? of Teilhard, whose daring cosmic theology was faulted for ?ambiguities and indeed even serious errors? in a 1962 Vatican judgment that was confirmed in 1981.
- Solar panels were installed this week on the pope?s private home in Regensburg, Germany, which are expected to feed power into the German electric grid. That move comes on the heels of the 2008 installation of solar panels atop the Vatican?s audience hall, a project which captured that year?s Euro Solar Prize (awarded by a secular environmental foundation).

This week?s new developments reinforce the impression that Benedict?s environmentalism -- expressed in both words and deeds -- has to rate as the most striking feature of his social teaching.

That said, calling Benedict XVI an ?environmentalist? nonetheless can court confusion, because his approach departs at the roots from that of secular European Green parties or the Sierra Club. In light of this week?s additions to his record, it?s worth fleshing out three unique features of Benedict?s ecological vision.

Theistic Ecology

Obviously, Benedict XVI approaches environmental issues as a religious believer, convinced that nature is the ?book of creation.? More than that, however, Benedict has implied that theism is not merely one among many points of entry into environmental concern -- it is actually the only way to achieve a balanced ecology, ensuring that the environment is respected without being turned into a fetish.

In effect, Benedict?s thinking on the environment seems to presume that there are three cultural models on offer to understand humanity?s relationship with the environment:

- A secular/scientific approach, which imparts no particular moral status to nature -- its aim is technical domination, regarding the material world as raw material for creative exploitation.
- A pagan or pantheistic view (including its romantic modern variants), which sees nature itself as the source of divinity, and thus regards it as taboo.
- A theology of creation, which regards nature as a gift of the Creator, to be used for the common good of the human family -- both its current members and future generations.

Here?s how Benedict put it in his recent social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*: ?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.?

That schema represents a striking departure from the early days of the environmental movement, when it was fashionable to fault the entire Judeo-Christian tradition for humanity?s savage indifference to the earth. Professor Lynn White Jr. of the University of California published an influential article in the journal *Science* in 1967, in which he blamed the Bible for making Westerners feel ?superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim.? (Catholic writer Stratford Caldecott notes that White?s article has become the obligatory point of departure for every discussion of Christianity and the environment; the article, he says, ?is famous, and famous for being famous.?)

In effect, Benedict XVI has gone on the offensive, arguing that rather than being the cause of the ecological crisis, Christianity is actually its solution.

Depending on how it develops, a ?both/and? Christian ecology could help inject balance into the growing tension between environmentalism and economic development, especially in poor nations. Here?s an example of how those tensions play out: In May 2003, the U.S.-based Congress for Racial Equality issued a statement bitterly critical of Greenpeace for its opposition to genetically modified crops, asserting, ?Well-fed eco-fanatics shriek ?Frankenfoods? and ?genetic pollution? ... Greenpeace policies bring misery, disease and death to millions of people in developing countries, particularly in Africa.?

An approach that does not set human development in opposition to natural conservation, but rather strives to see the two as integrally related, could help point beyond such standoffs.

Natural Law

Whenever church officials enter a moral debate these days, someone will inevitably object that they?re attempting to impose a particular religious teaching upon a pluralistic culture. According to this way of thinking, church teaching on abortion, stem cell research or cloning is disqualified as a basis for public policy because it?s sectarian in nature. That?s a deeply frustrating reaction for thinkers such as Benedict XVI, who argue that it puts things exactly backward. Abortion and human cloning are not wrong because the church says so, they insist -- rather, the church says so because they?re wrong.

The argument goes like this: The church?s moral teachings are not a set of arbitrary rules for joining the Catholic club, like wearing a fez or using a secret handshake. They?re based on universal truths rooted in human nature, which in principle anyone can recognize. This mode of reasoning is known as a ?natural law? argument. It assumes that right and wrong, truth and falsehood, are real qualities which exist in nature, and which human beings can discover using their conscience. So when Catholicism says ?x is wrong,? the ultimate validity of that claim rests not on the authority of the church, but the fact that x *really is* wrong.

According to Benedict?s vision, today?s environmental problems, from climate change to deforestation, illustrate that natural law is real. We now clearly understand, for example, that endlessly pumping out greenhouse gases in order to satisfy our consumer instincts exacts an objective physical price.

In that sense, Benedict XVI sees the rising tide of environmental consciousness as the most promising route for a recovery of the natural law tradition. In July 2007, Benedict said that environmentalism presumes that there are laws written into creation, and that ?obedience to the voice of the earth is more important for our future happiness than the voices of the moment, the desires of the moment.?

Without any reference to religion, Benedict seems to believe, the secular world today is arriving at its own version of natural law theory. To put the pope?s point simplistically, if the world is willing to limit its carbon output on the basis of the laws of nature, then maybe it will become more willing to accept limits in other spheres of life as well.

Pro-Life Environmentalism

From the beginning, the modern environmental movement has often been linked to alarm about human-overpopulation, both on the practical basis that larger populations put a great strain on the environment and on the theoretical grounds that human prerogatives should not trump the moral standing of the natural world and of other forms of life.

Once again, Benedict XVI turns this claim on its head. The pope argues that not only is openness to new life not at odds with environmental sensitivity, but that in fact you can?t have one without the other. As he put it in *Caritas in Veritate*, the world cannot protect natural ecology without also honoring ?human ecology.?

Here?s the relevant passage, from section 51 of the encyclical:

> ?The deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: *when ?human ecology? is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits*. ... In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. *The decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. ... It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other.?

What all this suggests is that while Catholicism under Benedict XVI is indeed turning ever greener, it?s a distinctive shade of green -- one that?s not simply about baptizing secular environmental movements, or applying a veneer of Christian vocabulary to a worldview that rests on very different premises.

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