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Revolutionaries, Pastors and Skeptics in Catholic ecology

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tPope Benedict XVI dedicated his recent message for the Jan. 1 ?World Day of Peace? to the environment, under the title of ?If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation.? Though the pope obviously didn?t choose that theme to give The **Future Church** a boost, it does lend some additional heft to the eighth major trend I identified shaping the Catholic future: Ecology.

tWhenever the pope issues a document, church leaders around the world generally rush to praise its wisdom, and that?s certainly the case this time around. Cardinal Francis George, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, today said, ?Pope Benedict seamlessly weaves together concerns for peace, poverty and care for creation. He calls on us to act to protect both human and environmental ecology for the two are inseparably linked.?

tSuch statements could suggest uniform support in the Catholic world for the pope?s environmental push, but anyone who knows Catholic realities understands that opinion in the church is usually anything but uniform.

In fact, Catholic reaction to today?s rising ecological sensitivity is extraordinarily diverse. In the book, I identify three basic camps: Revolutionaries, Pastors and Skeptics. In truth, these are more ideal types than real people, since actual flesh-and-blood Catholics probably incorporate elements of at least two, and maybe all three, into their thinking.

Here?s how I present the three groups in the book.

Revolutionaries, Pastors and Skeptics

tThe modern point of departure for Catholic environmental theology was a revolutionary: French Jesuit Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who died in 1955. A paleontologist, philosopher and theologian, Teilhard believed that evolution is humanity?s participation in the redemption begun by Christ. When evolution reaches its climax in what he called the ?Omega point,? Teilhard said the cosmos will achieve a form of ?Christogenesis.? Those views got him into trouble with Church officials, concerned that Teilhard?s thought flirts with pantheism. Seven years after his death, the Vatican censured Teilhard?s work, and in 1981, on the 100th anniversary of Teilhard?s birth, the Vatican reaffirmed that judgment.

Many Catholics still find much to commend in Teilhard. Archbishop Celestino Migliore, for example, the Vatican?s Permanent Observer to the UN, said in 2007 that whenever he goes to upstate New York he stops at Teilhard?s grave in Hyde Park, reflecting in the woods about Teilhard?s vision of the ?Christification? of the cosmos.

tDescendants of Teilhard today include eco-theologians and philosophers such as Fr. Diarmuid O?Murchu and Fr. Thomas Berry, as well Rosemary Radford Ruether, Matthew Fox and Brian Swimme. Though each has a distinct outlook, most share a sense that if Catholicism wants to embrace ecology, it needs a radical overhaul. In 1992, Berry said: ?We should put the Bible away for twenty years while we radically rethink our religious

ideas.? In O?Murchu?s *Quantum Theology*, he suggests that institutional religion is destined for extinction. ?What we cannot escape,? he wrote, ?is that we as a species have outlived that phase of our evolutionary development and so, quite appropriately, thousands of people are leaving religion aside.?

These personalities have a small but dedicated following, and they?ve helped to drive ecological questions to the forefront of the Church?s consciousness, but they?ve also set off doctrinal alarms. Fox drew a Vatican censure in 1988, and was dismissed from the Dominican order in 1992. O?Murchu attracted critical notice from the doctrinal committee of the Spanish bishops? conference in 2006. The bishops charged that O?Murchu ?speaks much of God and constantly talks of human liminal values in a ?planetary? or ?cosmic? context, but says almost nothing about Jesus Christ.?

For a less speculative and more pastoral approach, consider a 2000 letter from the Catholic bishops of the Pacific Northwest in the United States and Canada arguing for conservation of the Columbia River Watershed. From the outset, the bishops announce their intention to steer a middle course between ?economic greed? and ?ecological elitism.? The core principles upon which the letter is based are stewardship, respect for nature, and the common good. They promote the idea of creation as the ?book of nature,? a source of revelation and theological insight alongside the Bible. In general, the bishops move quickly from sketching a few brief theological ideas into direct application to concrete environmental problems. They?re apparently less interested in supplying a new theological vision than in mobilizing action.

tThe bishops offered ten considerations to guide future discussion:

?tThe Common Good
?tConserving the Watershed as a Common Good
?tConserving and Protecting Species of Wildlife
?tRespecting the Dignity and the Traditions of Indigenous Peoples
?tLinking Economic and Environmental Justice
?tCommunity Resolution of Economic and Ecological Issues
?tSocial and Ecological Responsibility in Industry
?tConserving Energy and Promoting Alternative Energy Sources
?tRespecting Ethnic and Racial Cultures, Citizens and Communities
?tSustainable Transportation and Recreation

The Columbia River Watershed pastoral letter is widely considered a turning point in official Church teaching on environmental questions, and has served as a template for similar projects in other parts of the world.

Skeptics in the Catholic fold include Antonio Gaspari and Riccardo Cascioli, who teach in the master?s program in environmental science at Rome?s Regina Apostolorum sponsored by the Legionaries of Christ. Both Gaspari and Cascioli have deep Catholic credentials. Gasparri has written for ?Zenit? and Inside the Vatican, while Cascioli worked for Vatican Radio. Together, they published a two-volume work called The *Lies of the Environmentalists* in 2004 and 2006. Its argument is that the ?catastrophism? of environmentalists is exaggerated. In some cases, they argue, it serves as a smokescreen for radical philosophical notions such as those propounded by the utilitarian philosopher and animal rights activist Peter Singer, who denies the unique spiritual status of human beings. In other cases, they suggest, dire warnings of ecological catastrophe may promote the interests of environmental lobby groups, law firms, and the media, by keeping public alarm at a fever pitch and thereby ensuring both funding and massive audiences.

In the United States, a group called the Interfaith Council for Environmental Stewardship put out the ?Cornwall Declaration? in 1999, following a meeting of leading Catholic and Evangelical conservative intellectuals. Catholic signatories included Fr. Richard John Neuhaus, Robert Royal, Fr. Robert Sirico, and Fr. J. Michael

Beers. Though affirming the legitimacy of environmental awareness, the statement referred to global warming, overpopulation, and rampant species loss as ?unfounded or undue concerns.? More broadly, it warned of setting economic development in opposition to good stewardship, describing that as a false dichotomy which would, in their view, keep the poor in misery.

While a preponderance of Catholic thought and activism may be ?greening,? these voices suggest it will by no means be a smooth development.

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