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Q & A: Christiana Peppard

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 14, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The USCCB's publication of a new book, Pope Benedict XVI: Essays and Reflections on his Papacy [1], has been the occasion for two weeks of discussion here at Q & A about Pope Benedict and his contributions to the Church.

This week we are hearing from the young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project, a gathering of under-40, untenured Catholic theology professors from around the country.

On these last two days of the series we get to hear from a husband and wife team, Christiana and Michael Peppard. It is a measure of the uniqueness of the times in which we live that the phrase "husband and wife team" has not, in previous generations, been applied to theologians!

Christiana Peppard is a doctoral candidate at Yale University, a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Ethics Education at Fordham University, and the Scholar in Residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City.

The question: What is the most significant contribution B16 has made to Catholic theology?

Christiana Peppard: Among the many possible theological legacies bequeathed by Benedict XVI is a focus on ecological thinking and environmental concern in an era of globalization.

Since ascending to the papacy, Benedict has made the environment an explicit area of reflection in both theory and practice, moving?for example?towards a more energy-efficient Vatican while encouraging intensive work within the Pontifical Academy of Science on environmental issues. Of course, as with all things Catholic, the focus on these topics from the hierarchical magisterium has not materialized out of thin air.

Attention to the environment in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) has been evolving since Vatican II, with important strides made by John Paul II and the USCCB, among others. In addition, social ethicists and ecological theologians beyond the Vatican continue to offer key insights?by querying anthropocentric doctrines, exploring myriad significations of incarnation and creation, and retrieving rich notions of nature from the history of theological reflection. Yet Benedict?s contributions evidence a recognizably distinct flair within the broader theological and ethical context. Of particular concern for Benedict are relationships among globalization, integral development, environmental integrity, peace, and human ecology.

In 2006 Benedict and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew issued a Common Declaration that dealt briefly with the topic of the environment in light of the realities conferred by economic globalization:

> At present, in the face of the great threats to the natural environment, we want to express our concern at the negative consequences for humanity and for the whole of creation which can result from economic and technological progress that does not know its limits. As religious leaders, we consider it one of our duties to encourage and to support all efforts made to protect God?s creation, and to bequeath to future

generations a world in which they will be able to live. (no. 6)

Three years into Benedict?s papacy, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace promulgated ten principles or commandments for the environment. Journalist Woodeene Koenig-Bricker elaborates these points by adducing relevant passages from many of the pope?s public addresses and letters, in her recent book, Ten Commandments for the Environment: Pope Benedict XVI Speaks out for Creation and Justice.

Consider especially Benedict?s Messages for the World Day of Peace from 2007, 2008, and 2010?each of which describes how ecological considerations and the pursuit of peace are mutually informing. The 2010 Message (?If you want peace, protect Creation,?), cites the Catechism in proclaiming that: ? ?creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God?s works,? and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind [sic]? (no. 1). This Message draws heavily on themes raised in Caritas in veritate, and it can be read as a crib sheet of key issues at the intersection of the environment and Catholic Social Teaching (CST) from the perspective of the hierarchical magisterium. Among the issues raised are:

- the notion of creation as gift and the concomitant human responsibility for its preservation and wise use;
- the importance of integral human development and intergenerational solidarity, with special attention given to the poor;
- the nature of the relationship between ?the Creator, human beings and the created order;?
- the interdependence of ?our present crises, be they economic, food-related, environmental or social;?
- the universal destination of the goods of creation and the place of private property within that framework;
- the importance of environmental impact assessments for economic policies regarding natural resources; and
- specific issues, such as fresh water pollution and depletion.

This Message is poised to become an important resource in Catholic environmental ethics, perhaps equaling in stature Pope John Paul II?s 1990 Message for the World Day of Peace.

One set of questions to which theologians and ethicists ought to be attuned is a steadily emerging assertion of a reciprocal, and seemingly direct, relationship between ?natural ecology? and ?human ecology??including, presumably, sexual morality (see, e.g., Caritas in veritate, no. 51).

As Maura Ryan indicated in a June 2010 Theological Studies article, such a link raises serious questions and remains to be fleshed out. How do ?right relations? in the realms of environmental integrity and sexual morality inform one another? I suspect that we will hear more from Benedict on this score, insofar as he believes that ?the social question has become a radically anthropological question? (Caritas in veritate, no. 75).

Ecological contributions are both theological and ethical.

Indeed, ecological awareness of the world in which we live, move, and have our being constitutes the most recent manifestation of the twentieth century?s convergence between matters of ethics and theological formulations. Hence, the ontological insights that emerge from a focus on ecology will have theological and ethical resonances. Yet because the concept of ecology is so vast and subject to many types of interpretations, both optimism and caution are needed.

In sum: Benedict has made important strides by emphasizing the environment and ecology. More remains to be seen about how ecological insights will be mobilized in conjunction with his moral anthropology.

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[1] http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1580512348/ref=s9_simh_gw_p14_d1_i1?pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_2&pf_rd_r=0DBVENDECZ2SBTJ17DW1&pf_rd_t=101&pf_rd_p=470938631&pf_rd_i=507846