

COSMIC COVENANT

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A CATHOLIC THEOLOGY OF CREATION

MATTHEW RAMAGE

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— ACADEMIC —

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Word on Fire Catholic Ministries
PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330 or
email contact@wordonfire.org.

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To wise guides who have taught us to read the book of
creation with awe and opened our eyes to
the covenant of love it proclaims

“Behold, I establish my covenant with you and
your descendants after you, and with every
living creature that is with you.”

Genesis 9:9–10

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Introduction

Why Care for Creation Should Be a Pressing Concern for Catholics

In the hearts of many faithful Catholics, a tension arises when contemplating the natural world and its relevance to our faith. Whether it is in our own backyard or on a visit to a distant shore, we treasure opportunities to get outdoors and enjoy the wonders of creation, marveling at the divine wisdom that stretches across the entire cosmos and “orders all things well” (Wis 8:1). For countless Christian families, some of our favorite moments and memories come from summer road trips to awe-inspiring destinations that John Muir aptly termed “cathedrals of nature.” Animated by gratitude for the great gift of creation’s splendor, the committed Catholic wants to do all that he can to see it flourish.

Unfortunately, today a variety of factors can prevent us from embracing creation as a significant dimension of our faith life. For one thing, the way nature is portrayed in our secularized culture can easily alienate the faithful. The messaging surrounding contemporary environmental discourse often evokes proposals for population control and dire predictions that frequently fail to unfold within the projected time frame. When this is combined with an apparent disconnect between the ideals promoted by environmental advocates and the way they actually live, it is understandable that many Christians struggle to engage with the movement and regard its claims with skepticism. Some also suspect that, at times, environmental alarmism may serve as a convenient pretext for entities that stand to profit from the very solutions they advocate. It is not difficult to see why such concerns arise.

Compounding the challenge, critics often single out Western civilization as a chief culprit in today's ecological crisis. Some go further, interpreting Scripture's mandate to "subdue" the earth as a justification for unchecked exploitation of nature. This has led to the perception that Christianity is fundamentally at odds with responsible stewardship and must therefore be rejected.¹ For believers who have encountered this attitude within segments of the environmental movement, it is understandable that suspicion arises. This makes it tempting to downplay care for the environment as a pressing issue and to counter scorn with more scorn.

Meanwhile, another temptation is for the believer to regard the natural world as having little relevance to the pursuit of holiness. Since it is accessible to all apart from divine revelation, some tacitly assume that it lies outside the sphere of God's grace. After all, we already possess the fullness of revelation in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. What, then, could nature meaningfully contribute to the message God has already spoken in the annals of salvation history? In light of these considerations, it is fair to ask: Should understanding and caring for creation truly be a priority for Catholics?

The pages of Sacred Scripture and the testimony of saints

1. The Vatican's International Theological Commission summarized this position when it observed, "Some critics go so far as to claim that the Christian tradition lacks the resources to field a sound ecological ethics because it regards man as essentially superior to the rest of the natural world, and that it will be necessary to turn to Asian and traditional religions to develop the needed ecological ethics." International Theological Commission, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* 72, July 23, 2004, vatican.va. Perhaps the most influential voice behind this line of argument is Lynn White Jr., who famously attributed the root cause of today's ecological crisis to the biblical mandate to "subdue" the earth. He saw this command as symptomatic of a dualistic worldview that sets man over and against the material world as its master—a mindset that further engendered an exploitative attitude toward nature with Christianity's notion of cosmic teleology and its dismantling of pagan animism. In the words of White, "More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one." Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–7, at 1206. While the Catholic cannot accept the claim that the ecological crisis stems solely from the Judeo-Christian tradition, White nonetheless makes an important point that anticipated the teaching of our recent popes—namely, technological solutions alone are insufficient to remedy the environmental problems we are currently facing. As our pontiffs have emphasized, what is needed is not merely innovation but a radical *metanoia*—a fundamental conversion in the way our species inhabits the earth.

across the ages answer this question with a decisive yes. From antiquity, the Church's tradition has held that nature is an epiphany of divine splendor analogous to the Lord's revelation in the book of Sacred Scripture. Further, the entire Catholic tradition is permeated by a captivating vision of a vital and intimate relationship between human beings and the natural world—the garden of the Lord which mankind is called to “till” and “keep.” The significance of this vocation has also received a strong emphasis in the writings of recent popes, the most well-known of which are Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, and his 2023 apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*.

Yet, while Pope Francis's remarks on environmental stewardship have garnered widespread attention, all this press risks overshadowing indispensable lessons from previous popes about care for creation. For instance, it is now widely forgotten that, already back in 1970, Pope Saint Paul VI foretold a looming “ecological catastrophe.”² It is also easy to forget that the environment was a topic of considerable importance for Pope Saint John Paul II, who routinely called the faithful to “ecological conversion.”³ Indeed, this saint taught that the call to exercise responsibility within creation is a “duty towards nature and the Creator” which is not peripheral but is indeed “an essential part” of Christian faith.⁴ For his part, Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) often emphasized “the great importance of education in the field of ecology,”⁵ insisting that a true understanding of our faith in the Creator carries this vital implication: “Since faith in the Creator

2. Paul VI, address to the FAO, November 16, 1970, vatican.va.

3. John Paul II, general audience, January 17, 2001, vatican.va. The saintly pontiff was, of course, not the first Christian to issue this call in the public square. Decades before John Paul's comments, C. S. Lewis hinted at the need for ecological conversion when he wrote that “reconsideration, and something like repentance, may be required” to restore balance to our approach to nature. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Macmillan, 1955), 89.

4. John Paul II, message for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1990, vatican.va.

5. Benedict XVI, address to students taking part in the meeting promoted by the Sorella Natura Foundation, November 28, 2011, vatican.va. To the extent that it is possible to do so while retaining its readability, this book at times refers to the one man Joseph Ratzinger / Benedict XVI by his surname and at other times by his papal name in the effort to distinguish writings composed during his pontificate from those preceding it.

is an essential part of the Christian creed, the Church cannot and must not limit herself to passing on to the faithful the message of salvation alone. She has a responsibility towards creation, and must also publicly assert this responsibility.”⁶ So central was care for creation to his pontificate that it earned him the moniker ‘the Green Pope.’ In fact, the Bavarian pontiff’s reflections on the environment were so frequent and far ranging that an entire book was needed to compile them.⁷

With all this in mind, it is clear that recent pontiffs have recognized the limitations of certain strands of mainstream environmentalism, emphasizing that care for creation is too important an arena to be shaped solely by voices that lack a full appreciation for the dignity and vocation of the human person. Indeed, our popes have routinely urged those of us who cherish the Bible not to neglect the Lord’s ‘other book.’ The rationale for this is articulated well in the words of Pope Benedict: “To omit the creation would be to misunderstand the very history of God with men, to diminish it, to lose sight of its true order of greatness.”⁸ Indeed,

6. Benedict XVI, Christmas address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2008, vatican.va. Anticipating the theme of integral ecology that we will discuss at length in the following chapters, the pontiff immediately added, “In so doing, [the Church] must not only defend earth, water and air as gifts of creation belonging to all. She must also protect man from self-destruction. What is needed is something like a human ecology, correctly understood.”

7. Benedict XVI, *The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology*, ed. Maria Milvia Morciano (The Catholic University of America Press, 2014). That Benedict’s environmental concern was not merely episodic but constituted a continuous and coherent body of reflection is made clear through Morciano’s work, summarized in Maria Milvia Morciano, “L’ecologia nel pensiero di Benedetto XVI,” *Vatican News*, October 19, 2019, <https://www.vaticannews.va/it/papa/news/2019-10/papa-benedetto-xvi-ecologia-sinodo-creato-magistero-laudoato-si.html>.

8. Benedict XVI, homily for the Easter Vigil, April 23, 2011, vatican.va. The full text surrounding this citation is significant, as he discusses why the Church includes Genesis’s creation narrative in the liturgy:

At the Easter Vigil, the journey along the paths of sacred Scripture begins with the account of creation. This is the liturgy’s way of telling us that the creation story is itself a prophecy. It is not information about the external processes by which the cosmos and man himself came into being. The Fathers of the Church were well aware of this. They did not interpret the story as an account of the process of the origins of things, but rather as a pointer towards the essential, towards the true beginning and end of our being. Now, one might ask: is it really important to speak also of creation during the Easter Vigil? Could we not begin with the events in which God calls man, forms a people for himself and creates his history with men upon the earth? The answer has to be: no. To omit the creation would be to

Ratzinger saw the retrieval of creation as so vital that he declared the renewal of our world possible “only if the teaching on creation is developed anew”—a task that “ought to be regarded as one of the most pressing tasks of theology today.”⁹ For his part, Pope Francis repeatedly urged believers to recognize our relationship with the natural world as an important spiritual priority, emphasizing that the way we relate to material things directly impacts the way we relate to God.¹⁰

As we will discover in the following pages, the Church’s perspective is distinctive for being thoroughly suffused with a Christocentric vision of creation. This robustly Catholic approach to inhabiting the created order takes its bearing from the paschal mystery—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, whose mystery is mirrored in the very fabric of nature. It stresses that we who bear God’s image are united, at every level, with all of God’s creatures in a covenant of kinship whose bond is forged in the likeness of the paschal mystery. This is an approach to creation that embraces even “sister bodily death,” through whose door all creatures must pass.¹¹

However, even as the various ecological writings of our popes are readily available in print, apart from Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* they have gone largely unnoticed. In particular, there has yet to be a thoroughgoing effort to systematically examine Pope Benedict’s ecological thought and demonstrate its practical implications in real life. Fulfilling this task is one of the goals of the present volume. Yet Benedict is by no means our only dialogue partner in this work, as the aim here extends beyond simply cataloging the

misunderstand the very history of God with men, to diminish it, to lose sight of its true order of greatness.

9. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Objection to the Church and the Distortion of the Image of Man,” in *The True Europe: Its Identity and Mission*, ed. Pierluca Azzaro and Carlos Granados, trans. Michael J. Miller and Brian McNeil (Ignatius, 2024), 162.

10. Francis, *Our Mother Earth: A Christian Reading of the Challenge of the Environment* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2019).

11. Francis of Assisi, “The Canticle of Brother Sun,” in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (Paulist, 1986), 37–39.