

THE PROBLEM: CONCERNING HUMAN ECOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

- **Catholics struggle with ways to harmonize their love for God with love for his creation, because they are confronted with ideological differences.** Ecology has become one of the central and polarizing issues of our time, pitting people against each other. Human ecology and all the life issues seem to many people to be antagonistic to “natural ecology” and concern for the rest of creation, but the book of life and the book of nature are one; the care of one requires the care of the other.
- **If the vision of nature as Gift is lost, says Benedict XVI “we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo, or abusing it.”¹** And so there seem to be only two ways to look at the environment – in a “First Trajectory” manner, where nature is seen as resources to be exploited, *or* in “Second Trajectory” environmentalism, which says that we have a horizontal relationship with nature: life is connected in one web and human life is no more valuable than animal or plant life.
- **Often it appears that the best Catholics can do is just follow behind the secular environmental movement.** But because both persons and nature are both Gifts of one creator God, we have a unique “Third Trajectory” to offer: our deepest, truest connection, the cause of the others, is our vertical relationship with God. If the reason we are connected horizontally is because we are connected vertically, then according to the popes, environmental problems occur because the vertical relationship is broken.

THE ANSWER: THE SEVEN C’S OF THE CATHOLIC VISION:

- **CREATION** - Not only the secular world, but even many Catholics, have lost the true understanding of Creation. If we get creation wrong, everything else will be wrong: if creation of everything, is not *ex nihilo* (covering space and time, and even their very possibility), then God is just another mechanical cause, a competitor to the mechanics of evolutionary theory, and life issues appear to be challengers to environmental concerns. If other persons and the things of nature are not our “ontological siblings,” children of one Creator, then they become rivals to be exploited rather than fellow creatures to be loved. If Creation is seen only as something that happened in the distant past, we lose our moment-to-moment dependence on God. And no secular theory explains Creation out of nothing, the Love that drew us into existence.
- **COVENANT** - Rather than extrinsic contractual relationships, a matter of *arbitrary choice*, Pope Benedict said that we must strengthen the *covenantal relationship* between “human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God”.² Covenant is a wider category than contract, based on what John Paul II called the “logic of Gift” and reflecting a sense of “family” care rather than merely market “exchanges.” Like its

¹ *Caritas in Veritate* 48. *Spe Salvi* 17 speaks of a “programmatic vision” based on science and praxis,” with faith dualistically relegated to a “purely private “ sphere and replaced with a Baconian “faith in progress,” as “the trajectory of modern times.” This is the “First Trajectory.” The “Second Trajectory” includes various postmodern responses to the First, and a relationality based on XXX. Pope Benedict calls for a “new trajectory,” a “Third Trajectory,” based on a deeper metaphysics of relation, in *Caritas in Veritate*.

² Benedict XVI, “The Human Family, A Community of Peace,” *Message for the World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2008, and again in CV 50 and 69.

prime example, marriage, the form of the covenant “extends through all the levels of life, from its biological roots up to the very heights of grace,”³ and so it can integrate and order contracts and choices. At the same time, it makes promises for a future it faces not in fear of scarcity, but in hope.

- **CONVERSION** - We need *not* simply social or political “consciousness raising,” but as John Paul II said, “*ecological conversion*” that changes everything about us and sends us forth in mission. Our own conversion can be followed by a conversion in our dealings with ecological problems: by *reversing* the standard order of starting with technical fixes and economic costs, which often lead to social or political conflicts, and instead beginning with the common call to meet our deepest shared needs for meaning, beauty, mystery, and friendship. Only then can we return to the technological, economic, and social levels.
- **CHILD** – The world tells us that we can solve environmental problems by abortion – by getting rid of people, treating children not as the *fruit of their parents’ love*, but as *products of their will*. For us, a child is not a burden, but a unique and precious self, and a generative hope for the future. Conversion changes our hearts; we can no longer speak of human persons as a “problem” for the environment, but see the beauty of Christ in every person.
- **CARITAS** - We hear a lot of talk about environmental *justice*, but we don’t often hear about environmental *caritas*. Many in the “Second Trajectory” think that if environmental justice could be achieved politically, then charity would drop out of the picture. However, Love includes and transcends justice; we need to care for each other and creation not in a juridical way, nor in the manner of mechanical commercial exchanges, but in the giving and forgiving that binds family members together.
- **COMMUNIO** - The “First Trajectory” is *anthropocentric*, “centered on man” and his utilitarian need for resources. The “Second Trajectory” says that we need to be *biocentric* and care about animals and plants, even at the expense of human life. But the Catholic “Third Trajectory” is not anthropocentric OR biocentric: we are centered on the Trinity, and Christ. Community is built into the foundation of reality because the Trinity is already a community, the ever-flowing mutual love and relationship between persons in the heart of reality. “Communio” with the Trinity flowers into solidarity with others and with all of creation.
- **CHRIST** stands at the center of the others, bringing all the “C’s” together: Covenant, Conversion, Child, Caritas, Communio, Creation. We are Christocentric, with a sacramental view of reality; with the vertical dimension, through the Incarnation can we have the Cross; only then can the “web of relation” make sense. Pope Francis said that “God’s plan of salvation ... embraces all of humanity and all creation,” and “In the Eucharist we learn to see the heights and depths of reality. The bread and wine are changed into the body and blood of Christ, who becomes present in his passover to the Father: this movement draws us, body and soul, into the movement of all creation towards its fulfillment in God.”⁴

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I: Seeing the Form*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982. P. 27.

⁴ Lumen Fidei