

Catholic Contributions to an Ethics of Responsibility toward Creation

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CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO AN ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD CREATION

A Thesis

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
1. The dimensions of responsibility.....	5
1.1. Secular voices: An appeal to save life on Earth and the imperative of responsibility _____	5
1.2. Christian voices _____	8
1.2.1. Dialogical theories of Christian responsibility	8
1.2.2. Social theories of Christian responsibility	12
1.2.3. Responsibility, freedom, and sin.....	15
1.2.4. Responsibility and knowledge	17
1.2.5. Responsibility and Christian identity.....	19
2. Sacramental liturgy and ethical responsibility toward creation.....	21
2.1. Liturgy, sacraments, and ethics: Does a relationship exist? _____	22
2.2. Sacramental liturgy and ethical responsibility toward creation _____	30
2.3. Responsibility as thankful gift-exchange _____	33
2.3.1. Receiving the gift.....	33
2.3.2. Giving thanks and praise.....	37
2.4. The responsible self as deacon _____	41
3. The narrative character of Christian responsibility.....	43
3.1. Consistent narratives and moral responsibility _____	44
3.2. Fragmented narratives, ethical disorientation _____	46
3.3. Science meets religion: mending the narrative? _____	49
3.4. Anthropological misunderstandings _____	54
3.4.1. A renewed <i>imago Dei</i>	55
3.4.2. Atomistic anthropologies	57
3.4.3. Human beings as persons-in-relation: An emerging anthropology?.....	59

4. Christian responsibility for the common good.....	65
4.1. The common good: aim and purpose of Christian responsibility _____	65
4.1.1. Overlooked dimensions of the common good	66
4.1.2. Challenge and opportunity.....	71
4.2. Human communities <i>and</i> the environment: An earth community? _____	73
4.3. Responsible relations and practices _____	79
4.4. Binding together _____	82
Conclusions.....	86
References.....	88
Electronic resources	91

Introduction

Agendas in ethics are often set by questions raised in the wider society. The growth and flourishing of environmental ethics is a good example of this phenomenon. In recent decades, the growing concern among scientists, politicians, economists, and the media regarding the future of life on the planet has raised all kinds of questions about the origin of the so-called ecological crisis. Complex analyses and different sets of solutions have followed. Yet the problems seem far from being solved. Ethicists and theologians have joined the conversation and have also proposed interpretations and complex, often contradictory, solutions to the problems raised by this crisis.¹

In this work, I neither analyze the historical roots of the current environmental crisis nor attempt to delimit the complexity and ramifications of the problems raised by the crisis. I merely seek to make a small contribution to the ongoing debate, rooted in the Catholic tradition. In writing this STL thesis I have tried to attain two different objectives. First, a more personal one, I have organized and clarified the many theological and ethical ideas I have studied in the last five years while reflecting on the particular ethical problem brought on by the ecological crisis. Second, I have tried to narrow down the focus of the growing field of Christian environmental ethics in order to make my contribution to the debate.

In Chapter 1, I approach the concept of responsibility from both secular and religious perspectives, trying to understand the multiple dimensions of this complex concept and its proposed foundations. Even if this term rings of deontological and non-biblical tones, I believe responsibility expresses in contemporary terms central dimensions of Christian faith and ethics. The concept of responsibility is a

¹ For Robert J. Schreiter, theologies of ecology are one of the four “global theological flows” or unsystemic theological discourses currently shaping Christianity. Cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 15-21.

complex and multidimensional one. It arrived late in the history of moral theology and has acquired several meanings over the course of the last two centuries.² The meaning of responsibility overlaps with many other philosophical and theological concepts. However, I will not explore all these connections and meanings in this work. The ones I will deal with primarily will be freedom, sin, justice, vocation, mission, love, or personal and social identity. In order to keep my focus sharp, in this introductory chapter I will rather narrow down my study to a group of secular, Protestant, and Catholic thinkers that has, directly or indirectly, tried to articulate an ethics of responsibility.

In Chapter 2, I draw from sacramental theology and liturgy to offer a particular vision of human responsibility toward creation in a sacramental world where human vocation is one of service and care for future generations, the poor, and life on earth. I argue that responsibility is not just a term within the field of ethics, but a moral dimension flowing from sacramental experience and liturgical practice within a religious community. In Chapter 3, I frame this particular Christian vocation within the narrative formation of communal and personal identity. This is a type of narrative that takes into account both scientific and religious understandings of the natural world and human beings. In spite of the moral and narrative fragmentation of our time, I argue that a more humble story of human beings will not only provide a more accurate image of the human place in the cosmos but also foster an ethics of responsibility toward creation. Finally, in Chapter 4, I turn toward Catholic Social Teaching and the concept of the common good as the aim and purpose of Christian responsibility toward creation. Sacrament, narrative (scripture), and ethics are the sources of a fully human, responsible, and Christian identity.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, Chapter 2.

1. The dimensions of responsibility

1.1. Secular voices: An appeal to save life on Earth and the imperative of responsibility

For scientist Edward O. Wilson, “humanity is in a bottleneck of overpopulation and wasteful consumption.”³ The deep concern for the future of life, sense of urgency, and historical responsibility perceived in Wilson’s writings is counterbalanced by his hope for an alliance for life of the two strongest cultural forces shaping human history, namely science and religion. According to Wilson, religion and science are “the two most powerful forces in the world today.”⁴ Both religion and science need to foster an alternative ethic of environmental sustainability and eco-justice in order to save life on earth. Wilson believes that this type of ethics is one of intergenerational responsibility; an ethics that takes fully into account the ecological services of nature and puts together an honest history where all, believers and non-believers, can agree. Moreover, for Wilson, stewardship is still a valid metaphor for humans in their project of being responsible and preserving life on earth. However, the meaning of stewardship needs to be well articulated and deepened. It requires a better understanding of the natural world, adequate scientific education, and a broader, less specialized academic knowledge. Education becomes one of the central places where responsibility toward the natural world is promoted. Yet, why should humans feel responsible for other, non-human forms of life?

The “biophilia hypothesis” undergirds Wilson’s ethical position. As Wilson puts it, “biophilia ... is the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms. Innate means hereditary and hence part of ultimate human nature.”⁵ For Wilson, evolutionary biology grounds human *philia* toward life in general. All species need to be valued since they are masterpieces of evolution and are genetically related to us. However, species cannot be saved unless we set aside large preserves of

³ Edward O. Wilson, *The creation: an appeal to save life on earth* (New York: Norton, 2006), 92.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. The necessary dialogue between science and religion in order to foster a unified narrative upon which build a robust theory of responsibility is a point I will address in Chapter 2.

⁵ Edward O. Wilson (ed.) *The Biophilia hypothesis* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993), 31.

ecosystems and realize our common ancestry and interdependence. As I will argue in Chapter 3, a new, holistic, and more humble anthropology is required to move away from the current impasse and realize our shared responsibility toward the natural world. Human beings play a prominent role in the natural world. However, they are historically and genetically dependent on all other beings on earth. Put in economic terms, humans are heavily indebted to all other beings. Human nature was encoded during the time we lived in intimacy with the natural world, an intimacy that has been lost in most contemporary urban settings. This historical process has not only led to a rampant biological extinction and an increasing biological impoverishment of the earth, but has also led to, using Sally McFague's terms, the "extinction of experience" or "loss of biophilia."⁶

Jewish thinker Hans Jonas has expressed a similar sense of urgency and historical responsibility. Jonas has made an attempt to build a secular ethics of human responsibility in our current technological age. The urgency and deep concern for the future of life expressed by Wilson is paralleled in Jonas' ground-breaking work *The Imperative of Responsibility*. Jonas argues that modern technology has changed the very nature of human action, and hence previous ethical frameworks cannot cope with the present challenges posed by the technological age. Responsibility has come to the center of the ethical stage and has become the new rational guiding principle that can save humanity. Jonas proposes a "heuristic of fear" where the long-range effects and dangers of technology are brought to the present. As he argues, "we know much sooner what we do not want than what we want. Therefore, moral philosophy must consult our fears prior to our wishes to learn what we really cherish."⁷

Whether grounded on fear or not, Jonas stresses the responsibility to ensure a safe environment for future generations, a responsibility in which the cautionary principle will play a central role. "Under

⁶ Cf. Sallie McFague, *Super, natural Christians: how we should love nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), Chapter 6.

⁷ Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: in search of an ethics for the technological age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 27.

such responsibility, caution, otherwise a peripheral matter of our discretion, becomes the core of moral action.”⁸ Statesmen and parents embody this important duty; parent-child relationship is the “archetype of all responsible action.”⁹ Intergenerational responsibility points toward some form of mutual indebtedness or, in Jonas’ words, a “duty to be truly human.”¹⁰

The centrality of intergenerational responsibility is also dramatically witnessed in political life. For German sociologist and historian Max Weber, one of the three decisive qualities for the politician is “a feeling of responsibility.”¹¹ The (good) politician is interested in “the future and responsibility toward the future.”¹² This type of future-oriented perspective in politics has been expressed by former General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR Mikhail Gorbachev. In his *Manifesto for the Earth*, Gorbachev affirms that security, poverty, and environmental degradation are the three major challenges facing the world in the 21st century. He also believes that humanity is facing a daunting historical task, “a humanity that already knows deep down that it must live in a united world and that it is responsible for future generations.”¹³

Parents (Jonas), teachers (Wilson), and statesmen (Weber and Gorbachev) become the archetype of responsible action, the best metaphor of (inter)generational responsibility. They act in the place of other men and women. They show, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out, that “responsibility is fundamentally a matter of deputyship.”¹⁴

But let us go back to Jonas for a moment before we move on to explore more explicitly religious perspectives on responsibility. It is worth noting that, paradoxically, although Jonas’ secular reflection is

⁸ Ibid., 38.

⁹ Ibid., 39.

¹⁰ Ibid., 42.

¹¹ Max Weber, “Politics as a Vocation,” In James M. Gustafson and James T. Laney, *On being responsible; issues in personal ethics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 294.

¹² Ibid., 298.

¹³ Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, *Manifesto for the Earth: action now for peace, global justice and a sustainable future* (Forest Row, East Sussex: Clairview Books, 2006), 8.

¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 224.

an effort to foster a metaphysical ethics of responsibility grounded on a non-religious theory of value, he opens the door to explicitly religious insights. As he himself realizes, “it is moot whether, without restoring the category of the sacred, the category most thoroughly destroyed by the scientific enlightenment, we can have an ethics able to cope with the extreme powers which we possess today and constantly increase and are almost compelled to wield.”¹⁵ As William Schweiker contends, Jonas raises questions that can only be answered from a theological point of view. To these explicitly religious views on the idea of responsibility I turn now.

1.2. Christian voices

1.2.1. Dialogical theories of Christian responsibility

Responsibility is a multidimensional concept. According to Bonhoeffer, six elements constitute the structure of responsible life: deputyship, correspondence with reality, pertinence, acceptance of guilt, conscience, and freedom. These six dimensions, however, have to be placed in a context, what he calls the *locus* of Christian vocation. Bonhoeffer’s understanding of responsibility is a clearly Christocentric one. Responsibility is the answer of the believer to the call of Jesus Christ and a total response to reality; “the centre of my responsibility is determined by the call of Jesus Christ which is addressed to me.”¹⁶ Responsibility is an all-embracing concept of Christian life which requires the whole person, “vocation is responsibility and responsibility is a total response of the whole man to the whole of reality.”¹⁷ The traditional terms used to express this “total response” is vocation or call. In short, Christian vocation is the context of Christian responsibility. However, this response is not a simple, conclusive answer. It is a

¹⁵ Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: in search of an ethics for the technological age*, 23. Toward the category of the sacred I will focus my attention in the following chapter.

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

call fraught with tensions and temptations that needs to be constantly renewed. Christian responsibility is ultimately conflictive, since it requires a total response to Christ in the midst of multiple, often contradictory calls.

Bonhoeffer's Christocentric understanding of responsibility as response to a call puts his ethics into the orbit of dialogical theories of responsibility. Catholic authors like Charles Curran and Bernard Häring or Protestant ones like Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr are also part of this particular ethical tradition. Dialogical theories, compared to social or agential theories, stress the importance of human encounters with the other, whether God or the human.

Niebuhr, in his effort to move beyond deontological and teleological ethics, understands human actions as responses or answers. In *The Responsible Self*, he defines human actions as a response or answer. Building on this assumption, persons are not ultimately makers (teleology) or citizens (deontology), but "answerers." According to Niebuhr, this dialogic understanding of ethics not only fits the biblical *ethos* better than the other two; it is also a more precise instrument for human self-understanding. It helps us answer central questions: "to whom or for what am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself?"¹⁸

These questions, though, cannot be completely answered since we are both free to respond and dependent on God and the natural world upon which we rely. This somewhat contradictory situation points toward the intrinsic tension-filled and problematic character of Christian ethics. It also indicates the human reality theologians call sin. The human condition is one of internal division and conflict. It is

¹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The responsible self: an essay in Christian moral philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 68.

also a fallen and sinful one, an ultimately dependent condition, one in which being responsible is a never-finished task and a permanent open question.¹⁹

At this point in my reflection, Niebuhr's theological reflection on responsibility has brought us back to one of the structural dimensions of responsibility pointed out by Bonhoeffer: the necessary acceptance of guilt and the recognition of sin. It also brings this reflection full circle back to the very foundation of Christian ethics, namely Christ. Jesus Christ is the one who "takes away the sins of the world," (John 1:29) the one who heals the broken human condition and shows the path to a restored, reconciled, and responsible life. Christian responsibility is a reflection on Christ, the model of universal responsibility.²⁰ As Niebuhr affirms, "the responsible self we see in Christ ... is a universally and eternally responsive I, answering in universal society and in time without end, in all actions upon it, to the action of the One who heals all our diseases, forgives all our iniquities, saves our lives from destruction, and crowns us with everlasting mercy."²¹

From the Christological dimension emerges a central aspect of Christian faith, namely love. Christ is the center of the moral life, a life shaped by forgiveness and the commandment of love. James Nash, in an effort to build a Christian environmental ethics grounded in love, has stressed that the distinctive character of Christian life is love. God is love (1 John 4:8), the whole of creation is a radical act of love, and all creatures are products of love (Cf. Wisdom 11:24). This theological claim holds radical implications for Christian ethics and places love at the heart of any ethical project. The Christian double commandment of love is an invitation to be responsible to God and to appreciate, respect, and be responsible for other humans. Love specially fuels one of the closest human relations, namely the parent-child relationship, one of the archetypes of responsibility. A "heuristic of love," alongside a

¹⁹As Niebuhr states bluntly, "it is painful to think of the absolute dependence in which I have been established." *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 167.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 145.

“heuristic of fear,” I believe, is a more appropriate way to foster Christian responsibility. The problem we face at this point in this discussion is that the object of love for Christians has traditionally been God and other humans. Can we speak of love and responsibility toward nonhuman beings?

This question leads us to examine the necessary “expansion” of such a central dimension of Christian ethics as love. Nash does believe in the legitimacy of extending the double commandment of love to non-human beings; Christian environmental ethics points toward an “extension of love to the whole creation.”²² Love is the solid ground upon which to build Christian responsibility; love is the “metaethical source of Christian ethics.”²³

But Christian love faces many difficulties in an ecological setting. One of the most daunting ones is the problem of predation, violence, and competition in a morally ambiguous natural world where death, suffering, and killing are necessary. The concept of love also faces problems of definition when applied to nonhuman beings. What exactly does it mean to love nature? Is there a hierarchy of love? What about the relationship between *agape* and *eros*, between love and justice, or the exact role of love in the midst of tragic choices? These are just some of the challenges. However, in spite of the many tensions facing Christian love in an ecological setting, Nash firmly believes that environmental/biotic rights undergirded by justice and Christian love define human responsibilities toward the natural world. In other words, Christian love is, for Nash, a non-negotiable ingredient in a Christian ethics of environmental responsibility.²⁴

²² James A. Nash, *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1991), 142.

²³ *Ibid.*, 140. According to Nash, reconciliation, communion, community, harmony, and shalom are the defining elements of love that will need to be translated into practical choices and policies.

²⁴ For Nash the dimensions of Christian love in an ecological context are beneficence, other-esteem, receptivity, humility, understanding, communion, and justice. Cf. *Ibid.*, Chapter 6.

Dialogical theories have shown that responsibility lies at the heart of the Christian vocation. Christian responsibility is an answer to the call of Christ. Moreover, it is not only a complex, tensional, loving answer to God, but to humans, nonhuman beings, and future generations as well. Furthermore, it is an answer fraught with difficult tensions and affected by the sinful human condition. Social theories of Christian responsibility help shed light on some of these challenges.

1.2.2. Social theories of Christian responsibility

Dialogical theories certainly hit the nail on the head and clarify many key dimensions of Christian responsibility. Yet, some other aspects, like the formation of moral identity and the role of the larger community in shaping personal responsibility, require further clarification. As Schweiker argues, “the self is an organ of the social whole; it is the community, not the individual, which is morally central.”²⁵ Social theories of responsibility come to our aid at this point, bringing the community to the fore and making a valuable contribution to this reflection. Persons are bodily beings in relation to other persons. We are shaped by our upbringing, the language we were taught, and the cultural tradition we grew up with. A person’s values and roles are influenced by many different communities in our life: family, friends, nation, etc. As Schweiker defines it, a person is a “role-bearing individual whose identity has been shaped by assuming the values, obligations, and duties entailed in his or her role(s).”²⁶ Communities shape and invite people to play a particular role in social life.

Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth Jonathan Sacks, in *The Home We Build Together*, has underlined the importance of community and responsibility in the task of building any viable society. Sacks argues that a responsible society prioritizes the ideas of giving and belonging instead of individual rights. For him, the “politics of responsibility” can find a solid ground on the

²⁵ Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian ethics*, 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

ancient biblical idea of covenant; a responsible, covenantal society “is a moral community, future-oriented, goal-directed, whose citizens are on a journey toward a destination.”²⁷ For Sacks, rights and responsibilities belong to two different systems. The Bible, he argues, has no word for “rights;” “it sets forth its moral vision entirely in terms of duties, obligations, responsibilities and commands.”²⁸ The covenant is a form of “transfer of responsibility” to human beings. Rights undergird democratic societies and are implicitly stated in the monotheistic traditions. Their importance should not be downplayed. However, as Sacks contends, “the Bible is more concerned with cultivating habits of responsibility.”²⁹

At this point, I could keep on emphasizing the importance of community in the identity formation process of the person and the construction of a viable society, isolating community forces like esteem and shame as the main elements shaping moral responsibility, downplaying dimensions like autonomy and individual freedom. Conversely, I could stress the importance of freedom and autonomy against cultural and social traditions in order to foster a truly adult, emancipated, responsible society. However, both dimensions are pointing at something important and worth consideration, namely the circular relationship between community and personal responsibility.

This circularity, again, shows the conflictive character of moral life and the tensional relationship between person and community in the moral identity formation process. It also evidences how ethical theories are heavily influenced by particular anthropological options. As Schweiker points out, “the idea

²⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *The home we build together: recreating society* (London ; New York: Continuum, 2007), 125. The goal of such a community is the common good or, as I will suggest in Chapter 4, the preservation of the common good of the single earth system.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁹ 133. Hans Kung, in his search of a new global ethic, has stressed the importance of a Universal Declaration of Human Responsibilities that would complement the previous Declaration of Human Rights. Although rights and responsibilities can be distinguished, they cannot be separated from each other. As Kung argues, “human rights and human responsibilities do not mutually restrict each other for society but supplement each other in a fruitful way.” Hans Kung, “Don’t Be Afraid of Ethics! Why we need to talk of responsibilities as well as rights.” In *World's Parliament of Religions, A global ethic and global responsibilities: two declarations*, InterAction Council ed. (London: SCM, 1998), 118. Kung also argues that ethics goes well beyond the sphere of law and thus there is a fundamental distinction between law and ethics. An ethics of responsibility can provide the necessary motivation to respect and foster human rights; “an ethical impulse and the motivation of norms is needed for an effective realization of human rights” (*Ibid.* 111).

of responsibility is embedded in the modern debate about how to understand human existence.”³⁰ In other words, depending on how human beings in community are understood, particular ethical elements will be stressed, and a particular theory of responsibility will emerge. Inevitable intellectual options remind us that, in spite of philosophical and theological preferences, different views have to be taken into consideration.

Social theories of responsibility insist that Christian character and identity are shaped through both narrative and community. Yet narrative and community are not two different elements, but rather dialogical dimensions of a single, ongoing formation process. If we consider community to be the starting point of any moral account of responsibility, then, as Stanley Hauerwas suggests - and Sacks would subscribe to this as well - the crucial social practice of a religious community would be “telling the story” of God’s action in the world. Works of mercy and education, for instance, would be practical ways of telling the same story. The aim of moral Christian life is not to grasp ethical concepts, rules or laws, but to appropriate and live out the biblical story. A particular *ethos* will flow out from this living story, or, more specifically, as I will argue in the next chapter, an *ethos* of responsibility will be shaped by the Christian story rehearsed and continually reenacted in the Eucharist.

Social theorists of responsibility also stress the importance of language, storytelling, and tradition to hold communities together and build a persisting moral identity through time.³¹ For Hauerwas, one of the leading thinkers of this school of thought, community and scripture are correlative realities that shape each other.³² Language, knowledge, and roles are learnt in community. One cannot be morally responsible unless he/she has certain knowledge of the context and consequences of his/her actions. Community and socially-constructed linguistic categories provide the necessary framework to interpret

³⁰ Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian ethics*, 65.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Chapter 7.

³² Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, *A community of character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

moral actions and express moral ideas. Visions of life, ethical insights, and cultural narratives only take place in historical and communal contexts. They are sustained in communities that provide the symbols, rites, and hermeneutical resources to make them intelligible.

However, social factors do not tell the whole story. As dialogical theories emphasize, even in a strongly socially-shaped environment, a free, responsible answer is required in order to have adult, fully-developed persons. To be responsible is, to an important extent, to be free and able to interpret what is happening and what the outcome of a particular action is. In other words, responsibility requires socially-constructed knowledge and a certain degree of personal freedom. To these two dimensions I now turn.

1.2.3. Responsibility, freedom, and sin

“The basic premise should be to aim at the greatest amount of freedom possible, but also to develop the fullest sense of responsibility that will allow that freedom itself to grow.”³³

In spite of the strong influence of community and the power of collective sin on the person, the quest for responsibility has to deal at some point with human agency and freedom. There is a commonly held belief in jurisprudence, psychology, ethics, and theology that, unless humans are free and act voluntarily, it would make no sense to talk about responsibility. Agential theories of responsibility have stressed the importance of individual freedom in order to be morally accountable; a responsible society is one composed of free agents. This dimension is present, though to a lesser extent, in dialogic and social theories as well. Freedom appears as a necessary element in any moral reflection and, furthermore, as Schweiker contends, “the way freedom is understood shapes an account of responsibility.”³⁴

³³ World's Parliament, *A global ethic and global responsibilities: two declarations*, 4.

³⁴ Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian ethics*, 148.

Let us turn now briefly to Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest medieval theologians, to frame the importance of freedom in moral life. Aquinas' interest on theological determinism and human freedom makes him argue in the *Summa Theologiae* that "perfect" human knowledge makes voluntary action possible ().³⁵ For Aquinas, "perfect knowledge of the end" consists not only in "apprehending the thing which is the end, but also in knowing it under the aspect of end, and the relationship of the means to that end" (Cf. ST I-II, q6.a2). Informed, "perfect" knowledge and freedom go necessarily together; you cannot have one without the other. This is why violence, fear, and ignorance deprive one of perfect knowledge and hence cause involuntariness (Cf. ST I-II, q6.a.5.6.8). Perfect knowledge, grounded in the theological understanding of the human as a rationally created being or *imago Dei*, differentiates rational (human) and irrational beings (nonhuman) and makes moral responsibility possible. In short, from Aquinas we learn that both informed knowledge and freedom are necessary elements in the quest for an ethics of Christian responsibility.

Building on Aquinas and Martin Heidegger, Karl Rahner contends that both freedom and responsibility are "existentials of human existence."³⁶ Rahner's theological understanding of freedom is related to, yet has to be distinguished from, the understanding of freedom within the fields of psychology and jurisprudence. Freedom flows from the open and undetermined nature of human beings; freedom is "the capacity of the one subject to decide about himself in his single totality."³⁷ Furthermore, freedom is the condition of possibility of a responsible life and, conversely, for Rahner, responsibility is already present in the experience of transcendental freedom.

³⁵ Cf. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica* I-II, q6.a1 In <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>. Accessed March 2011.

³⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith: an introduction to the idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 93.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

In this experience “I’ always experience myself as the subject who is given over to himself.”³⁸ A person can evade his responsibility “and can interpret himself as the product of what is not himself.”³⁹ This is the root of sin, “the possibility of a decision against God.” Paradoxically, in being disobedient the subject is both acting as a free subject and being co-determined by others. Person and community are, once again, in a tensional relationship. Sin, freedom, and hence responsibility are socially dependent. Sin is not only a personal human dimension, but a collective one as well. As Rahner puts it, human sinful condition is co-determined “by the guilt of others.”⁴⁰ When it comes to responsibility, Rahner tries to balance a sound understanding of personal freedom with the pervasive and community-driven presence of sin. Both elements are held in tension and offer a context for understanding the paradoxical character of Christian responsibility.

1.2.4. Responsibility and knowledge

Freedom and knowledge are necessary ingredients in any theory of responsibility. For Aquinas, “perfect” knowledge made voluntary actions possible and, as Wilson has pointed out, in spite of the intrinsic uncertainty of any scientific statement, scientifically-informed knowledge is necessary in order to foster responsibility for the future of life on earth. Knowledge is, to a great extent, as I have already underlined, socially-constructed and linguistically mediated. Along these lines, leading environmental ethicists have stressed the importance of informed knowledge or “ecological literacy” in order to foster responsibility toward nature. Environmental ethicists such as Sally McFague, John Hart, and Michael Northcott have insisted on the importance of knowledge and direct experience of the natural world in order to foster an environmental ethics of responsible care for creation.

³⁸ Ibid., 38.

³⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 109.

According to McFague, the modern atomistic anthropology, disembodied epistemology, and the urban “extinction of experience” are some of the key factors that have led to the present environmental crisis. For her, a new inter-subjective, embodied, ecologically literate model of knowledge will foster the emergence of an ethics of responsible care for nature. Direct exposure to nature is required in order to form this type of “ecologically proficient” subject.⁴¹ For Hart, whose environmental ethics is inspired in the narrative, biographical accounts of Christian saints like St. Francis of Assisi and the community-based insights of Native American Indians, a “relational consciousness,” deeply connected to a “relational community,” will foster responsibility and commitment for the commons.⁴² The importance of these traditional insights should not be overlooked, but rather connected to postmodern scientific understandings of nature. Northcott opts for a relational anthropology inspired by the natural law tradition. He believes that local communities need to recover the mechanisms of environmental control. Most environmental problems have a local character and require local solutions. Stable local communities often have the moral capital and the ecological knowledge to tackle these problems. Informed and ecologically sound knowledge is local and communal; it has to be placed, as he puts it, in a “parochial” setting. This type of local, environmentally-literate community sets the context of responsibility toward nature.⁴³

⁴¹ Cf. McFague, *Super, natural Christians: how we should love nature*, 207. For Douglas Burton-Christie, being ecologically proficient requires attentive listening and learning the language of the place. The work of “nature writers,” like Henry David Thoreau or Annie Dillard, are good examples of this attentive listening. Through the words of writers and poets, the voice of a place emerges. Cf. Douglas Burton-Christie In “Words Beneath the Water: Logos, Cosmos, and the Spirit of Place” In Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and ecology: seeking the well-being of earth and humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 317-336. Wendell Berry has made a similar point and called “nature poetry” a form of secular pilgrimage in which and “impulse for reverence” toward the natural world can be found. Cf. Wendell Berry, “Secular Pilgrimage,” In Ian G. Barbour (ed.), *Western man and environmental ethics; attitudes toward nature and technology* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co, 1973), 132-155.

⁴² Cf. John Hart, *Sacramental commons: Christian ecological ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), Chapter 11.

⁴³ Cf. Michael S. Northcott, *The environment and Christian ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

For these three authors, community, narrative, ecological literacy (knowledge), and responsibility are deeply intertwined. In all three cases, an inter-subjective, relational, non-individualistic anthropology underlies their understanding of Christian responsibility toward nature.

1.2.5. Responsibility and Christian identity

In this introductory chapter, I have collected a variety of elements that can frame a Christian understanding of environmental responsibility and, hopefully, gained a better understanding of where I stand. I also hope that these elements do not look like isolated brushstrokes in an abstract expressionist painting. It is true that we live, as Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, in a world of fragmented, often contesting, moral narratives.⁴⁴ Yet, as I will try to show in Chapter 3, I believe we still can make “moral sense” and find a coherent story open to other traditions, secular and religious alike. I am aware of the daunting challenge posed by the modern fragmentation of life and the increasing specialization of knowledge. This is why I cannot bring these different moral dimensions together into a single, unified theory of Christian responsibility. Yet I hope this introductory chapter has set an appropriate background upon which some constructive contributions to a Catholic understanding of responsibility toward nature can be made.

Christ and vocation, fear and love, sin and guilt, knowledge and freedom, narrative and community are some of the central moral elements of Christian responsibility I have isolated so far. All these elements are somehow connected and, when articulated, foster a particular Christian ethical behavior, moral character, or attitude. This interconnected set of elements points toward an “identity” or, in Schweiker’s words, a type of “moral integrity.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Cf. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁴⁵ Cf. Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian ethics*, 124-125.

Ethics is a restless quest for coherence, an effort to make moral sense, a progressive attempt to achieve wholeness. Christian ethics is a desire to follow Christ. This quest has humble origins; it acknowledges our fragmentation, broken history, radical dependence, and limited ability to understand. Facing the daunting challenges posed by the current environmental crisis and our confused ethical climate, we still have hope and trust in the ability of the Christian tradition to provide the necessary moral resources and the guiding symbols to confront these challenges. In order to promote a new way of life on Earth, we need to retrieve traditional insights that have been either overlooked or misinterpreted in our own tradition. One of these insights, toward which I turn now, is the sacramental vision of the world and the dynamic of thankful gift exchanged displayed in Christian liturgies.

2. Sacramental liturgy and ethical responsibility toward creation

“But this sacramental vision demands unflinching recognition of the poverty of one’s own being – for many too terrible to be true – and joyful acceptance of the absolute agape that supports one’s own being – for many too good to be true. This requires the expansion of the imagination.”⁴⁶

In Chapter 1 I reviewed various accounts of Christian responsibility and pointed to some important dimensions of this central moral concept. I explicitly avoided a strictly deontological understanding of responsibility, while opening it to a theological perspective. The current environmental degradation of the planet has drawn the attention of scientists, economists, politicians, and the mass media. Yet this crisis is a major concern for theologians and ethicists as well. The widespread crisis is not only a daunting problem but an excellent opportunity for the Christian tradition to revisit ethical foundations, distorted practices, and overlooked theological dimensions. One of the overlooked dimensions is Catholic sacramental theology.

In this chapter I explore the ethical dimension of sacramental theology. I divide the chapter into two sections. First, building on Louis-Marie Chauvet, Don E. Saliers, and Gordon W. Lathrop, I argue that there is a circular relationship between sound sacramental liturgy and ethics. This previous clarification is required in order to move forward to the main point of the chapter: from the circular relationship between Christian ethics and sacramental liturgy flows an ethics of responsibility toward creation. It is an ethics grounded in the Eucharistic dynamic of gift-return. I will argue that the Eucharist is the central Christian story (Chapter 3); it is a story that orients moral responsibility toward the common good (Chapter 4).

In the second part of the chapter, I try to make a contribution to Pope Benedict XVI’s call for responsibility toward creation. I contend that one of the hidden assumptions underlying liturgies is an

⁴⁶ Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 113.

out-dated and limited understanding of creation. This assumption needs to be corrected and put into dialogue with modern cosmological and ecological perspectives in order to develop a creation-oriented sacramental liturgy and an earth-caring Christian ethics. This dialogue between science and religion will be further explored in Chapter 3. I contend in this section that an ethics of Christian responsibility toward creation requires a double dynamic of attachment to and detachment from creation. This type of dynamic is already present in the Eucharist and can be stated as a dynamic of “wide-open senses” and “gift-return.” The sacramental vision displayed in the Eucharist depicts the tensional human-earth relationship and offers solid ground for a Christian ethics of responsibility toward creation.

Finally, I suggest that a revisited diaconate is a good anthropological metaphor to foster responsibility toward creation. Deacons preach the gospel and serve the table, but also take care of the poor and the earth. Christian environmental ethics needs a sacramental vision, a revisited cosmology, a creation-oriented liturgy, and a renewed understanding of human vocation as service to the poor and the earth. In short, sacramental liturgy brings together *leitourgia* and *diakonia* and offers an image of the human as a responsible, ecologically literate steward.

2.1. Liturgy, sacraments, and ethics: Does a relationship exist?

“To think liturgically and ethically is to try to help the Church discover connections by developing historical analogies, exploring philosophical and theological implications, and in the process to make normative recommendations.”⁴⁷

For contemporary liturgist and theologian Don E. Saliers, there is a connection that runs deep between sacramental liturgy and ethics. Saliers has stressed the importance of this connection and

⁴⁷ Stanley M. Hauerwas, “Worship, Evangelism, Ethics: On Eliminating the ‘And’” In E. Byron Anderson, Bruce T. Morrill, Peter E. Fink (ed.), *Liturgy and the moral self: humanity at full stretch before God: essays in honor of Don E. Saliers* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 99.

considers liturgy as a “rehearsal” for the way we relate to one another and to the world. For Saliers, the “patterns of prayer, reading, proclamation, and sacramental action are precisely the practices of communal rehearsal of the affections and virtues befitting ‘life in Christ’ ... The symbolic forms and actions of liturgy are the school for conceiving and receiving such a pattern of life.”⁴⁸

The importance of this communal rehearsal and its influence in the social and political life has also been stressed by Gordon W. Lathrop. This author will rather use geographical metaphors to express the connection between liturgy and ethics, suggesting that liturgy offers a particular “orientation” for the believer in the world. According to Lathrop, sacramental liturgies like Baptism and Eucharist provide cosmological “maps” to the Christian assembly. Maps orient us in relation to important locations, to particular places. Metaphorical places like birth, life, death or community orient human life and are given great meaning and “cultural weight.” Worship orients the community in both time and space “in a world of meaning and meaningful action”⁴⁹. Human life is a journey in need of geographical references and cultural meaning. That is why liturgical orientation matters and has an ethical and political character for the Christian community. As Lathrop argues, “the Christian assembly can make modest though critically important proposals about economy and politics, can reorient us in the use of public symbols, and can show us the godly hole in our spheres and systems.”⁵⁰ Christian liturgy orients its participants in the world; it offers a symbolic orientation.⁵¹ Moreover, liturgy would not only orient the community in space and time offering a geographical framework, but it would also offer active orientation in a particular direction. A particular active orientation toward action – *urgos* means action – displayed in the narrative dynamic of liturgy, the intercessory prayers, the collection for the poor, and the Eucharistic

⁴⁸ Don E. Saliers, *Worship as theology: foretaste of glory divine* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 176.

⁴⁹ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy ground: a liturgical cosmology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 55.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 51; Cf. *Idem.*, “O Taste and See” In *Liturgy and the moral self: humanity at full stretch before God: essays in honor of Don E. Saliers*, 41-54.

shared meal. In short, liturgy appears to offer an orientation to the Christian assembly that has an inevitable ethical dimension.

However, many people do not believe participation in the sacraments makes any difference in the “real life” of the believer. Critique and suspicion regarding the real influence of liturgy on political and social life have arisen over time. Political and economic interests have used liturgy as an instrument of control. Christian liturgy has also assimilated non-Christian traditions that have deformed its real character. Despite Saliers’s and Lathrop’s conviction regarding the connection between liturgy and ethics, this relationship still remains a very complex one. At least four critiques have questioned the very existence of this relationship.⁵²

First, postmodern critics have denied that liturgical practices form moral character at all. According to this critical analysis the amazing diversity of liturgies in history shows that each liturgical tradition has favored a set of canonical scriptures and particular practices, according to their local interests and concerns. As H. Paul Santmire points out: “Some postmodern critics of Christian ritual practices, to be sure, have claimed that the idea of a countercultural liturgy is a contradiction in terms, since the liturgy, by their definition, is essentially ‘cultural,’ that is, the agency of the powerful ...”⁵³ To put it in different terms, postmodern critics believe that a shared liturgy or “common story” does not necessarily frame a single ethical understanding of Christian life.

Second, sacraments are often interpreted as signs carrying an internal meaning. This meaning would be susceptible to being transferred to political and social action and, consequently, the lines between sacramental liturgy and ethics would be blurred. Some authors question whether this transfer of meaning does occur in practice. For example, as William T. Cavanaugh argues in *Torture and Eucharist*, the

⁵² Cf. Saliers, “Afterword: Liturgy and Ethics revisited” in *Ibid.*, 209-224.

⁵³ H. Paul Santmire. *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 46.

assumption that sacraments' symbolic meaning can be directly applied to the world and the political sphere carries a hidden "gnostic" understanding of the sacraments.⁵⁴ For Cavanaugh, liturgy is basically an "action," not a meaningful sign susceptible to being translated into political categories. In theory, true liturgy should be a public, political performance. In practice, Cavanaugh believes, it is not.

Third, Christian churches have too often domesticated Christian worship and turned it into an instrument of control and dominion. Liberation and feminist theologians have stressed the potential alienating power of Christian liturgy. Along these lines, Cavanaugh contends in his analysis of the Chilean Church during the Pinochet regime that torture was tolerated and downplayed by the Church because the Church had already "handed over the bodies of its members over to the state."⁵⁵ The Church's historical inability to be the real "body of Christ" supports the argument that Christian liturgies cannot really influence the ethical sphere.

Finally, even assuming that the connection between ethics and liturgy does exist, we would need to weigh it against the overwhelming influence of mass media, lifestyles, and social rituals in shaping human character and praxis. As Saliers recognizes, "human beings are formed in myriad ways."⁵⁶ The influence of these social forces in a globalized world makes the hypothetical ethical-shaping character of liturgy appear rather pale. While trying to bring together ethics, liturgy, and sacramental theology, are we walking a tightrope?

These four critiques pose a serious challenge to my thesis. They reveal the "gap" between everyday life and the real intentions and actions of the worshipping community. Yet, as Saliers observes,

⁵⁴ Cf. William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: theology, politics, and the body of Christ* (Oxford; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 286.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16. According to Cavanaugh, this particular case would show the historical ecclesial inability to foster real Eucharistic "counter-politics."

⁵⁶ Saliers, *Worship as theology: foretaste of glory divine*, 188.

“recognition of the gap itself is part of what authentic liturgy forms and expresses in our lives.”⁵⁷

Despite the many liturgical distortions and historical failures, the history of Christian liturgy not only provides arguments to look with suspicion at the relationship between liturgy and sacramental ethics, but also brings to the fore the fact that there are common liturgical and sacramental patterns across time and place. These patterns have to do with Christian initiation, sacred meals, daily prayer, taking care of the poor, healing, and burial. Christian liturgies do not simply absorb local cultures; they also discern incompatible practices and criticize specific behaviors.

The Christian ethical imagination has historically been shaped by the Scriptures, lives of paradigmatic Christians, and Church institutions; it is constantly being shaped by the reading and preaching of the Scriptures and by ecclesiastical practices and rituals. Liturgy places important events in a “meaningful context” and leaves its stamp on public and private life alike. The notion of responsibility has an embedded meaning within the living Christian tradition through narratives, rituals, and practices. As Hans Bernhard Meyer argues, Christian liturgy “kept the experience of Christian brotherhood available through the centuries and prepared the ground for necessary social changes.”⁵⁸ Sacramental practices, devotions, and works of mercy “allowed many elements of biblical Christianity to flow into the everyday lives of the people.”⁵⁹ This scriptural “flow” into ethical praxis is mediated by the liturgical assembly; it has been embodied in communal practices. Worship is something people do together on a regular basis. Worshipping communities continuously meet to recall, sustain, and reenter the Christian tableau and find the motivation and the strength to commit themselves to the Kingdom. Confession and thanksgiving are just two examples of liturgical practices where the assembly recalls and “represents” on

⁵⁷ Ibid., 174.

⁵⁸ Hans Bernhard Meyer, “The Social Significance of the Liturgy” in Herman A. P. Schmidt and David Noel Power, *Politics and liturgy* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974), 49.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 44. James Keenan has also stressed the important historical connection between works of mercy and the Eucharistic liturgy. Cf. (James F. Keenan, *The works of mercy: the heart of Catholicism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 101-122.

stage the story of God and the human being. As Saliers contends, this permanent rehearsal is not just mechanical repetition or *imitatio*, but a deliberate communal rehearsal of the great narratives of creation and redemption, a rehearsal that articulates a shared story of faith and a common moral story.⁶⁰ A similar historical argument has been provided by Santmire. As he argues, “the liturgy originally *did* function ... sometimes *has* functioned ... and arguably still *can* function – as a countercultural, community-forming ritual, for the sake of peace and justice and ecological hope.”⁶¹

Of course, liturgy does not offer a solution to every moral dilemma in life. Liturgy probably will not extricate us from the ecological crisis. However, liturgy is necessary in order to sustain moral life and continually reenter the meaningful story that shapes Christian imagination and action. It becomes a powerful character-shaping rehearsal and a way to motivate ethical commitment and responsibility. As Lathrop argues, liturgy is a form of cultural “mapmaking” and, therefore, an exercise of power in itself.⁶² This statement on the power of liturgy does not imply we can use liturgy in a utilitarian way or as a political instrument for particular interests. Liturgy has a certain power and influence in shaping the community’s moral imagination; therefore, it needs to be constantly revisited and critically analyzed.

The liturgical shaping of the Christian ethos is always tempted to be isolated and disconnected from its source: Jesus Christ. Yet, no possible Christian ethics, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, will flow out from sacramental liturgy without a direct reference to Christ. When Christian liturgy forgets its Christological dimension it risks becoming mere story, empty discourse. That is why the relationship between liturgy, sacraments, and ethics has to be constantly re-examined with the Christological lens. As Saliers argues, there are persistent Christian practices with “overlapping narratives.” These practices

⁶⁰ Cf. Saliers, “Liturgy and ethics: some new beginnings” In *Liturgy and the moral self: humanity at full stretch before God: essays in honor of Don E. Saliers*, 24.

⁶¹ H. Paul Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 46.

⁶² Cf. Lathrop, *Holy ground: a liturgical cosmology*, 57.

shape the character of the community and have a potential for self-revision.⁶³ In other words, the constant hearing and healthy liturgical rehearsing of the Christian story questions and re-shapes the ethos of the community. Despite the many historical failures and abuses, as Saliers writes, “the worship of God raises the question, suddenly or slowly ‘How ought we to live?’”⁶⁴ This question cannot be answered before we realize that the connection between liturgy, sacraments, and ethics is not linear, but circular. Put in slightly different terms, the interaction between sacramental liturgy and Christian ethics is a never-ending process, a circular relationship that needs to be constantly revisited. This circularity has been highlighted by Louis-Marie Chauvet in *Symbol and Sacrament*.

Christian identity has a narrative and dialogical nature. It is a constant “dialogue” between three distinctive elements: storytelling-Scripture (sign), sacramental experience (symbol) and ethical behavior (praxis or ethics). These elements make up, in Chauvet’s words, “the tripod of Christian identity.”⁶⁵ We might be tempted to believe that being Christian is all about ethical behavior, or we might be inclined to think it has to do with particular rituals, or we could even affirm being Christian is to believe in a system of religious norms encoded in the Bible and Church teachings. Yet these three elements of Christian identity cannot be isolated or disconnected from the others; they have to be articulated. And this articulation has to be dynamic. Christian identity is articulated through narratives that shape the imagination and motivate action. Furthermore, Christian identity is formed by those activities in which we engage. Narratives and practices are internalized in a pre-reflexive way and summon us to a particular form of Christian-inspired life; they become part of our identity. This is why liturgy matters and why there is a certain priority of practice over theory; prayer and action tend to go first and reflection usually follows. Most biblical texts were written and compiled after a long period of oral use

⁶³ Cf. Saliers, “Afterword: Liturgy and Ethics Revisited.” In *Liturgy and the moral self: humanity at full stretch before God: essays in honor of Don E. Saliers*, 213.

⁶⁴ Cf. Saliers, “Afterword: Liturgy and Ethics Revisited.” In *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶⁵ Louis Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 176.

in liturgical assemblies. Moral codes also arose as a reaction to practices considered incorrect by the community. In other words, liturgy and practice are sources of theological reflection; they are *theologia prima*.

The explicit theological dimensions of liturgy and the narrative character of both Christian identity and sacramental liturgy have also been stressed by Lathrop. Building on Dominic T. Crossan's gospel analysis, Lathrop contends that there is a close relationship between the gospels' narrative structure and Christian sacramental liturgy. The structure of the gospels has shaped Christian liturgy, established assembly patterns, and fostered a distinctive Christian ethos. The structure of Mark's gospel influenced the other canonical gospels, became normative, and intertwined with Christian practices of the early Church. For Lathrop, the story of Emmaus (Lk 24: 13-35) is one of the paradigmatic stories of the Christian community where the connection between gospel narrative, sacramental liturgy, and assembly patterns is depicted. The story of Emmaus, as Chauvet has also noted, is a compelling scriptural argument for the deep connection between scripture, sacramental liturgy, and ethics. Narrative, meal, passion, resurrection, and mission constitute the inner *ordo* of Christian identity, liturgy, and practice.⁶⁶

This particular Christian *ordo* is not just a description of the Christian *ethos*; it implies a narrative commitment to materiality. It fosters a sacramental cosmology or, in Lathrop's words, "sarcophilic worldview."⁶⁷ In other words, the Christian *ordo* not only pays attention to biblical narratives and liturgical practices, it also expands its concern to the materiality of the whole world and to the history of all created beings. As Lathrop writes, "this *ordo* ... inserts a community into the concrete history, including the 'natural history,' of the earth."⁶⁸ The *ethos* that flows out from scriptural narratives and sacramental liturgy takes into account the whole materiality of creation. As I will try to argue in the next

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 161-169; Lathrop, *Holy ground: a liturgical cosmology*, 131-132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

section of this chapter, the Christian *ethos* rehearsed in sacramental liturgies is one of care and responsibility toward creation.

2.2. Sacramental liturgy and ethical responsibility toward creation

“To be responsible for creation is to open it, just as one opens the dense wholeness of a loaf of bread in order to share it.”⁶⁹

Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2010 World Day of Peace message, explicitly encouraged Christian responsibility toward creation.⁷⁰ Does this recommendation require a review of Christian responsibility, and if so, what does it have to do with sacramental liturgy? The answer to the first question is yes. As Benedict XVI contends in *Caritas in Veritate*, “The Church has a responsibility toward creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere.”⁷¹ Christian ethics needs to face the new moral problem posed by the rampant destruction of the planet. The answer to the second question is more complex and requires further explanations. First, it requires a working definition of creation. Second, it needs a sound understanding of the relationship between creation and human beings. As Christians, I will argue, this relationship is paradigmatically displayed in Christian sacraments, namely the Eucharistic dynamic of gift return.

For Chauvet, there is a close connection between creation theology and responsibility: “the theology of creation proposes the emergence of a responsible word. To confess creation is to attain emergence of a responsible word. To confess creation is to attain freedom. The given of the universe is received as an

⁶⁹ Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence*, 553.

⁷⁰ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace 2010*. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace_en.html. Accessed December 2010.

⁷¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 51. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html. Accessed December 2010.

offer.”⁷² Christian responsibility toward creation means concern about and care for the materiality of the earth and the history of all created beings, present and future. Before continuing, it would be valuable to pause and consider the meaning of creation. I can then proceed to suggest how a creation-oriented sacramental liturgy can foster ethical responsibility.

There are three different “schemes” or ways of understanding creation.⁷³ The first one is the “artisanal” scheme, which is based on Genesis and has dominated Christian interpretation. In this model, causality is the main explanatory category. God appears as the “first cause” of a static universe created by God. Human beings re-create this action in their relation to nature. The second scheme is the “biological.” Here generation or emanation becomes the central category. This model is more dynamic than the previous one and fits better with modern theories of evolution and natural history. Yet, it still makes creation too dependent on an internal necessity. Finally, there is the “verbal” scheme, which is grounded on John 1 and the Christological cosmologies of Eph 1 and Col 1. This third model plunges us directly into the symbolic order of the sacraments and offers a more dynamic and flexible understanding of the relationship between God, creation and the person. According to Chauvet, the great advantage of this model is that it makes room for human creativity by respecting the autonomy of human action while fostering a sense of responsibility for the gift received via a dynamic of gift-return. As he puts it: “The Christian notion of creation, irreducible to human creativity (which nevertheless comes from it) but also indissolubly linked to it, thus expresses both human beings’ dependence on God as creatures and their responsibility in history for the management of a universe and existence acknowledged as a free gift.”⁷⁴

Creation is a gift, Christ is a gift, and, as Pope Benedict XVI has recently stated, “we are a gift.”⁷⁵ The Eucharistic dynamic ritualizes and brings to the fore these central Christian beliefs. The Eucharistic

⁷² Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence*, 551.

⁷³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 548-555.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁷⁵ *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 68.

prayers are an explicit invitation for humans to constant transformation and re-creation of the gift received. For Saliers, “the Eucharistic prayers are the most intensive and extensive form of praise and thanksgiving in the Christian tradition.”⁷⁶ As Chauvet puts it, in the Eucharist “the given of the universe is received as an offer.”⁷⁷ This offering becomes an invitation to appreciate the gift and to praise God. As it is read in the prayer at the presentation of the gifts by the priest, “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made.” These two sentences convey and express liturgically what an ethics of thankfulness and gift-return is all about; namely, opening up the gift received, in order to share it with others. This Eucharistic dynamic contains the seminal ideas of an ethical project grounded in a Catholic sacramental sensibility. In short, a Christian ethics of responsibility has to engage the believer in a dynamic of gift-return.

However, even when the gift has been acknowledged as a gift, the action of returning the gift is not just a matter of mere “paying back” or passive compensation. Gift-return implies responsive action and creative involvement with what was first received and is being returned. We never give back the very same gift we have received. Furthermore, giving back intends to be creative. In the offering we do not “give back” grapes and wheat, but bread and wine. The gift is transformed and recreated in a responsible answer. In other words, the Eucharistic dynamic, if well understood, implies responsibility and creativity. The Eucharistic offering or oblation expresses liturgically this kind of dynamic. The prayer at the presentation of the gifts is a gesture of appreciation for and disappropriation of the gift received. This gesture creates distance and detachment from the materiality of the gift, fostering not only gratitude but also respect and responsibility. In Chauvet’s words, “this respect, which is a distancing, a detachment

⁷⁶ Saliers, *Worship as theology: foretaste of glory divine*, 89.

⁷⁷ Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence*, 553.

from an all-devouring utilitarianism, opens up the opacity of the real.”⁷⁸ Responsibility has to do with this “opening up” of the real once the real has been perceived as a gift.

In other words, being responsible toward creation entails a tensional dynamic of attachment to and detachment from all created gifts, namely the kind of paradoxical and tensional dynamic rehearsed in Christian sacramental liturgy. On the one hand, it involves being close, getting attached, and awakening to our own reality as creatures and to the wider materiality of creation. It means saying thanks. Moreover, as I will argue later, in order to perceive creation as a gift there are basic liturgical requirements, namely, “coming to our senses” and “ecological literacy.” As Saliers reminds us, “without remembering that creation is a gift, without remembering that our lives are gifts ... we can never begin to grasp the hope that is offered to us in the symbols, words, and the ritual actions of the Christian assembly.”⁷⁹ On the other hand, Christian responsibility toward creation also requires a certain detachment and distance from all created things. It requires a discipline of self-giving, mourning, and dispossession. As I will argue at the end of this chapter, it requires an ethos of humility, self-giving, and service. So with all this being pointed out, the question now becomes: how can Christians be attached to and detached from the gift of creation in order to be responsible toward it?

2.3. Responsibility as thankful gift-exchange

2.3.1. Receiving the gift

“Moral progress comes only as we learn to acknowledge our life as a gift.”⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ibid., 553.

⁷⁹ Saliers, *Worship as theology: foretaste of glory divine*, 26.

⁸⁰ Hauerwas, *A community of character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic*, 4.

Being responsible toward creation first requires awakening to our own senses, the materiality of creation, and the consequences of our dwelling on earth. It requires attention, literacy, and “cultivating a sense of awe and wonder.”⁸¹ I refer to the type of awe and wonder Moses experienced in front of the burning bush (Cf. Ex 3:5-14). Responsibility toward creation first requires attachment to and appreciation for the natural world. The whole fabric of creation is threatened because of human voracity, selfishness, and slumber; reckless dwelling, disordered eating habits, constant moving, and greedy consumption are pushing the earth’s ecosystems to the brink of collapse.

It is commonly held that the Judeo-Christian tradition has de-sacralized the natural world. Yet Christians still believe that, in light of God’s theophany in Sinai, the place on which they are standing can be “holy ground.” This belief has ethical implications. As Lathrop has emphasized, “the unique holiness of God does not exclude but rather entails the holiness of the ground, the bush, the surrounding ecology of things.”⁸² In order to perceive this “mediated holiness” in nature, we need to become “ecologically literate” and awaken to our embodied condition. We need to see ourselves as dependent and embedded in the complex network of life, namely creation. Creation is a gift entrusted to us and we need to know exactly what is happening to this gift.

For Saliers, liturgy can play an important role in this recognition process. Awakening to our senses will certainly require the physical senses of hearing, seeing, touching, moving, smelling, and tasting. Moreover, it will require, as Lathrop points out, an embodied and “sarcophilic vision” of human nature and experience, a rejection of gnostic and dualistic temptations, and “a sensual reorientation in the world.”⁸³ Furthermore, it will require reconnecting real life, sacramental symbolism, and meaningful worship through our senses. “Symbols without the life experiences of the believers brought to the liturgy

⁸¹ Lawrence E. Mick, *Liturgy and Ecology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 33.

⁸² Lathrop, *Holy ground: a liturgical cosmology*, 4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 56.

can indeed become empty.”⁸⁴ For Saliers, true and relevant Christian worship is characterized by the life experiences or senses of awe, delight, truthfulness, and hope.⁸⁵

These four senses structure Christian sacramental liturgy and will inform ethical responsibility toward creation. We cannot be responsible for creation unless we first experience the grandeur of the natural world, the vastness of the universe, the complexity of the earth’s ecosystems, the long evolutionary history of the earth, the immense power of human action, and – at the same time – the radical limitation of human life on earth. Awe, delight, truthfulness, hope, fear, and many other “senses” are profound human experiences found in the biblical stories, in daily human life, and in the natural world. They are basic “liturgical senses” that convey praise of God in creation.

No wonder Catholic theologian Kevin W. Irwin insists on the importance of using creation in worship in order to truly praise God in liturgy. As he observes, “one of the purposes of liturgy and sacraments is to give voice and expression to the inarticulate but nonetheless real praise of God in creation by the very use of creation in worship.”⁸⁶ Along these lines Edward Foley, in his study of the Eucharistic preparatory rites, alerts that “a very schizophrenic ritual now shapes the way the community thinks about creation.”⁸⁷ He identifies three problematic aspects: the medieval hierarchical ordering between the people and the priest, radical discontinuity between God’s creative and saving deeds, and tight boundaries around the gifts and their isolation from the food chain. These several suggestions and

⁸⁴ Saliers, *Worship as theology: foretaste of glory divine*, 27.

⁸⁵ Cf. Don E. Saliers, *Worship come to its senses* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 96. Along these lines, J. Harley Chapman, from a non-Christian perspective, has coined the term “natural piety” in his attempt to connect awe, delight, and respect for the natural world. Natural piety is, for Chapman, “the awe-filled respect for, and the often-attending delight in, the presence of the divine in the natural world; as a discipline, it is, additionally, a practice, an intentional structure of behavior, the end of which is to foster the experience of the divine in nature.” J. Harley Chapman, “The practice of Natural piety as a spiritual discipline,” In Donald A. Crosby and Charley D. Hardwick (eds.), *Religious experience and ecological responsibility* (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 144. Chapman considers place, body, and time three crucial elements in the ‘practice’ of natural piety (Cf. *Ibid.*, 147-149).

⁸⁶ Kevin W. Irwin, “Sacramentality of Creation and the Role of Creation in Liturgy and Sacraments,” in Dianne Bergant, Richard N. Fragomeni, and John Pawlikowski, *The Ecological challenge: ethical, liturgical, and spiritual responses* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 112.

⁸⁷ E. Foley, K. Hughes, G. Ostidiek, “The preparatory Rites: A Case Study in Liturgical Ecology” in *Ibid.*, 98.

critiques show the imperative for sacramental liturgy to go back to its biblical sources, foster a “sarcophilic attitude,” take creation into account, and “come to its senses.”

The liturgical senses Saliers talks about not only foster reverence and praise of God in creation; they also foster ethical motivation and stimulate human reason. The quest for truth and the resulting awe of scientific discoveries impels science to participate in this human experience. That is why, for authors like Kevin W. Irwin, Richard N. Fragomeni, Gordon W. Lathrop and Lawrence E. Mick, cosmology and ecology need to be put into dialogue with theology and liturgy.⁸⁸ The incorporation of modern scientific insights into Christian liturgy will not create confusion, but will perhaps foster a new creation-sensitivity and a sense of deep interdependence between the earth and the worshipping community. A scientifically-informed creation story will promote the sense of awe, delight, truthfulness, and hope characteristic of a healthy liturgy.

For Fragomeni, this kind of revisited creation story would have an “impact on the religious imagination of Christian believers and on their relationships to each other and the world.”⁸⁹ Building on Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Berry, Fragomeni believes a new Christian cosmic narrative, a “revisited story of origins,” would have to be based upon empirical data, will have to demonstrate how everything is genetically related, and how in humanity the universe has become conscious of itself. This new cosmic creation story (or, as Lathrop would put it, “liturgical cosmology”) provides public symbols, meaning to existence, ordering of social authority, guidance, psychic energy, and can engage us in the

⁸⁸ Harvard professor E. O. Wilson, from a secular perspective, has suggested that there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems. This biologically-based human sense, or *biophilia*, would explain the instinctive human love for life. Cf. Edward O. Wilson and Stephen R. Kellert, *The Biophilia hypothesis* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1993), 484.

⁸⁹ R. N. Fragomeni, “Liturgy at the heart of creation: Toward an Ecological Consciousness in Prayer” in Bergant, Fragomeni, and Pawlikowski, *The Ecological challenge: ethical, liturgical, and spiritual responses*, 70. Toward this new, integrated cosmological and anthropological “big story” I will turn in the following chapter.

care of the earth.⁹⁰ In other words, an ecologically-informed liturgy will bring the worshipping community to its senses and make it appreciative of the gift of creation.⁹¹

According to Chauvet, the sacramental way of appreciating the gift is under the mode of oblation or thanksgiving. Sacraments are humankind's acts of thanksgiving toward God. In the Eucharistic prayer, the priest proclaims the Christian assembly's indebtedness and thankfulness to God: "it is our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks." A particular ethics of thankfulness is rehearsed in the Eucharist. The assembly, acknowledging God's abundant gifts, finds its right place and its correct distance. It learns to praise, step back, and express thanks. It learns to return the gift. "It is in giving thanks, in giving back to God God's own Grace, Christ given in sacrament, that we are given back to ourselves."⁹² At this point, once sacramental liturgy has shown that creation is a gift and our lives are gifts, the second dimension of an ethics of gift-return has to be addressed.

2.3.2. Giving thanks and praise

"Human beings should accept them with gratitude and, even adopting a Eucharistic attitude with regard to every element of creation, to give thanks to God for them."⁹³

A renewed Christian liturgy, then, will promote deeper sensible attachment to nature and an appreciation for creation as a gift. The first dimension of the gift-return dynamic, getting close to creation, is a necessary step to foster Christian responsibility toward creation. However, Christians cannot get "too close" and praise creation; Christians give thanks for creation but are not nature-worshippers. As Christians we need to step back and renounce all temptation to worship or keep the gift. A sound ethics of responsibility toward creation informed by the Eucharistic dynamic of gift-return

⁹⁰ Cf. "Liturgy at the heart of creation: Toward an Ecological Consciousness in Prayer", 75. Cf. Lathrop, *Holy ground: A liturgical cosmology*, 2-6.

⁹¹ As Saliers puts it: "Over time, authentic liturgy deepens our disposition to perceive the world as God's creation." Saliers, *Worship as theology: Foretaste of glory divine*, 37.

⁹² Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence*, 311.

⁹³ ITC, "Communion and Stewardship," 79.

requires a second step; it requires appreciation, detachment, and service. We need to step back and offer the gift. That is what the great rehearsal of the Eucharist and the central Christian invitation are all about: returning the gift.

The main problem is that we are too comfortable mastering the world, keeping the gift, and enjoying its benefits. As Chauvet argues, “this is why, in a culture whose foundation is a long metaphysical and technical tradition of the critical ‘inspection’ of the real, the required dispossession of mastery is so difficult for us to accept with serenity.”⁹⁴ The success of modern technology is one of the main reasons why the primacy of the possessive, the immediate, and the utilitarian have become central elements of Western civilization. But this mastery of the world has many destructive side-effects for both humans and non-humans. The increasing destruction of the earth’s ecosystems is one of the most obvious side-effects of this centuries-long process of control and mastery. Human relations have not been left untouched either. The technological age, with its unquestionable gifts and opportunities, is also destroying human communities and the very fabric of creation. Many signs of social breakdown and injustice are connected to this cultural mastery brought by modern technology. The technological acceleration that has created the huge divide between rich and poor countries is bringing many traditional cultures to the brink of extinction. The supremacy and accelerated control of humans over all other beings is showing itself as unsustainable and destructive for all.

At this historical impasse, sacramental liturgy can make a valuable contribution. As Santmire writes: “The first and definitive act in the life of the liturgically molded believer is to step back and to contemplate all the wonders of God’s gracious acts, as Creator, Savior, and Consummator, more particularly, in our view here, wonders that are given in the world of nature, by grace alone- and to be grateful.”⁹⁵ Liturgy teaches us to stand firm against the temptation of mastery and to recognize God as

⁹⁴ Ibid., 327.

⁹⁵ Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis*, 193.

the ultimate and only true master of heaven and earth. As the assembly acknowledges in the response to the preface of the Eucharist prayer: “Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory, Hosanna in the highest.” This public praise of God’s power and might is an antidote for human hubris. We need to repeat again and again, “it is right to give God thanks and praise.” The Eucharistic dynamic of gift-return points toward an ethics of contemplation, simplicity, praise, and responsible detachment. In other words, healthy sacramental liturgies foster a Eucharistic ethic of contemplation and gift-return.

Sacramental liturgy can teach us to renounce the ambition for mastery, to let-it-be, step back, contemplate, and do “nothing.” Liturgy opens up a space of gratuitousness that is by definition non-measurable, non-controllable. We are not in control of the sacrament “rehearsed.” Sacramental liturgy is a barrier before our desire to dominate.⁹⁶ As Chauvet puts it, “the ritual rupture performs a symbolic function that is extremely beneficial to faith. It creates an empty space with regard to the immediate and utilitarian.”⁹⁷ This distance or empty space is key to liturgy and plays a pedagogical role: it opens the subject to the experience of mystery, the experience of grace. Parallel to this experience of detachment runs the experience of radical human limitation.

I pointed out in Chapter 1 that recognition of human limitation and sin are necessary ethical dimensions of Christian responsibility. As Santmire has showed, “(an) awareness of individual and corporate sinfulness permeates the liturgy, from beginning to ending, and comes to expression in acts of confession, hymnody, proclamation, and in the Eucharistic rite itself.”⁹⁸ The *Kyrie, Agnus Dei* or the prayer before communion: “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed” make the assembly acknowledge human sin and God’s power. Liturgy expresses in a non-rational way our limitation and radical dependence on God as creatures.

⁹⁶ Gn 1:26 is an invitation for dominion, not domination.

⁹⁷ Chauvet, *Symbol and sacrament: a sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence*, 337.

⁹⁸ Santmire, *Ritualizing Nature: Renewing Christian Liturgy in a Time of Crisis*, 200.

The experience of sin, human limitation, and detachment is the type of experience we so desperately need in this time of technological mastery of the real. The necessary ritual distance displayed in liturgy shows that we are not in control – God is. Despite humanity’s incredible technological achievements and scientific discoveries, we need to realize the radical limitation of all human knowledge and action; we need to acknowledge creation as God’s gift, step back, appreciate, and return the gift. Otherwise, we would be praising idols. This is the kind of distance and space sacramental liturgies can teach in our present age of dominion and technological control.⁹⁹

Finally, sacramental liturgies not only invite us to step back, remove our sandals, praise the Lord, and recognize the gifts of creation. Furthermore, they invite us to return what we have received and give ourselves back following Christ’s total self-giving. As Chauvet puts it, “rendering to God what God gives us is to dispossess ourselves not only of something but of our very selves.”¹⁰⁰ It is no wonder that John Paul II explicitly connected the Eucharistic dynamic of gift-return with Christian ethics. As the Pope wrote: “All of us who take part in the Eucharist are called to discover, through this sacrament, the profound meaning of our actions in the world ... and to receive from it the strength to commit ourselves ever more generously, following the example of Christ, who in this sacrament lays down his life for his friends.”¹⁰¹ Sacramental liturgy in general and the Eucharist in particular is a source of ethical motivation, self-giving, and an explicit invitation to renounce the ambition for mastery.¹⁰² In short, Christian sacramental liturgy is a solid ground upon which to build a Christian ethics of responsibility.

⁹⁹ Jacques Ellul, along these lines, has argued that in our present technological age we need an ethics of non-power. This type of ethics, as he puts it, “involves a permanent decision which is not only personal but also institutional, because it challenges manipulation and automatic growth; it is both a refusal of competition and the institution of a new, non-competitive pedagogy.” Cf. Jacques Ellul, “The Power of Technique and the Ethics of Non-Power,” in Kathleen Woodward (ed.), *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture* (London: Routledge, 1980), 245.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 277.

¹⁰¹ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 48.

¹⁰² As Chauvet contends, Christian responsibility appears at the end of a circuit of gift-exchange, yet “the ethical dimension is not simply an extrinsic consequence of the Eucharistic process; it belongs to it as an intrinsic element.” *Ibid.*, 277. Cf. Saliers, *Worship as theology: foretaste of glory divine*, 86-88.

2.4. The responsible self as deacon

And here is where sacramental liturgy and Christian ethics enter into fruitful dialogue, where *leitourgia* and *diakonia* meet. I pointed out in the introduction that a Christian ethics of environmental responsibility toward creation needs a creation-oriented liturgy, a dynamic of gift-return, and an understanding of human vocation as service to the poor and the earth. I have so far treated the first two requirements. Now, in order to complete this discussion, I would like to briefly point out that the Christian diaconate offers a valid anthropological metaphor for our present time of environmental breakdown and moral disorientation. As Lathrop argues, “the basis of the moral agency in the Christian life is *diakonia*.”¹⁰³ The ministry of deacon is a powerful metaphor that brings together the liturgical, sacramental, and ethical dimension of Christian life. Deacons are at the crossroad of a renewed sacramental liturgy and an ethics of Christian responsibility toward creation.¹⁰⁴

The ordination of deacons concludes with the presentation of the Book of the Gospels, namely the story of Jesus and the early Christian Church. On that day, three short sentences confront the deacon as the bishop presents him with the book of the gospel: “*Believe what you read. Teach what you believe. Practice what you teach.*” These sentences sum up how Christian service proceeds; it starts by hearing and believing the story (scripture), follows by bringing the story to others (teaching and preaching), and ends by acting and rehearsing this story (ethics or service).¹⁰⁵ Every deacon, therefore, is called to believe, teach, and practice the Gospel of Jesus, the particular Christian story. The Eucharistic dynamic

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁰⁴ The Church should call “environmental deacons” capable of bringing liturgy, sacrament, and ethics together. Cf. Susan Power Bratton, “Response to Daniel C. Maguire: The Church Should Call not Just Prophets but Environmental Deacons,” in Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Christianity and ecology: seeking the well-being of earth and humans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 429-437.

¹⁰⁵ Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings” in *Liturgy and the moral self: humanity at full stretch before God: essays in honor of Don E. Saliers*, 16: “the concretization of the moral life requires a vision of a world, and the continuing exercise of recalling, sustaining and reentering that picture of the cosmos in which norms and practices have meaning and point.”

of gift-return is not just a model for ordained ministers; it is an invitation to anyone who hears the story. It is the ethical invitation that flows out from the Eucharistic gift-return dynamic. Scientifically-informed interpretations of biblical narratives, creation-oriented liturgies, and an understanding of Christian vocation as service will shape the Christian imagination and foster a distinctive ethics of responsibility toward creation.

The crossroads between sacramental liturgy and ethics has proved to be a fruitful ground to cultivate the gift-return dynamic and appreciate creation, rehearsing again and again the very self-giving dynamic displayed in liturgy. The rehearsal of this dynamic, though, needs, as I have pointed out several times so far, a shared narrative or common story. This narrative will have to pay attention to both religious and scientific accounts of nature and humans beings. I turn now my attention toward the necessary narrative dimension of Christian responsibility.

3. The narrative character of Christian responsibility

A consistent narrative is a coherent framework that takes account of the various dimensions of the human place in the cosmos. The previous chapter argued that the story of Jesus displayed in sacramental liturgies is the keystone of any Christian moral reflection and the founding narrative of Christian ethics. The most primitive formulation of the Christian faith has a narrative structure, namely the story of Jesus the Christ.¹⁰⁶ For Christians, the central narrative is the Eucharist and the sacramental vision flowing out from this story. A particular vision of the human as a steward or deacon, I pointed out in the previous chapter, emerges from this vision.

In the first part of this chapter, I argue that we live, for a number of historical and philosophical reasons, in a world of fragmented narratives. However, despite the fragmentation and moral disorientation of our time, I contend that the dialogue between science and religion is providing a set of anthropological themes upon which a sound understanding of responsibility can be built. In the second part, I argue that in telling a more humble story regarding human existence, the emerging narrative not only corrects previous theological misunderstandings, but also offers a more holistic view of human beings as interrelated with and dependent on the earth's ecosystems. This image of dependent persons-in-community matches traditional Christian insights, corrects misinterpretations of the *imago Dei* theme, fosters the idea of indebtedness, and promotes a shared responsibility for the well-being of our global earth system.

¹⁰⁶ As Stanley Hauerwas has argued, "the Gospel is the story of a man who had the authority to preach that the Kingdom of God is present." Hauerwas, *A community of character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic*, 37.

3.1. Consistent narratives and moral responsibility

“The loss of the capacity for narrative would amount to the ultimate disempowering of the human subject, for without narrative there is no continuity between present and past, and therefore no responsibility, and therefore no possibility of acting together to govern ourselves.”¹⁰⁷

A sound understanding of responsibility requires community-mediated knowledge and socially-constructed linguistic categories. Knowledge and interpretation do not take place outside of a community or particular narrative tradition; neither does responsibility. Communities are formed by stories and constantly re-enter these stories to find sustenance and guidance. The story of Emmaus, as Jean-Marie Chauvet has persuasively argued, is a particularly fine example of the narrative structuring of the early Christian community.¹⁰⁸

The importance of telling the Christian story again and again becomes an ethical exercise and an ecclesial necessity. Stanley Hauerwas has creatively argued in *A Community of Character* that any ethical account involves a narrative. As he writes, “the ‘ethical problem’ is not one just of decision, but of description and interpretation as well.”¹⁰⁹ Hauerwas’s point is that “truthful narratives” provide an adequate account of the community’s existence and resources to draw on in times of crisis.¹¹⁰ As he writes, “there is no way to speak of Jesus’ story without its forming our own. The story it forms creates a community which corresponds to the form of his life.”¹¹¹ That is why, for Hauerwas, biographies of saints and narratives of discipleship matter. He argues that Christian biographies are not only a form of piety, but “a social ethics.”¹¹² The stories of other Christians shape our imagination, guide our action, and become an ethical and political activity. Hauerwas’s insistence on narrative is pertinent at this point

¹⁰⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's discontent: America in search of a public philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 350-351.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, 160-170.

¹⁰⁹ Hauerwas, *A community of character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic*, 4.

¹¹⁰ The modern ideal of purely rational knowledge, independent of tradition and community, has proved flawed. The very linguistic structure of human knowledge is inevitably mediated by a tradition.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

for two interconnected reasons. First, it reminds us that we need a consistent narrative of human beings and nature able to undergird a robust ethics of ecological responsibility toward nature. Second, the search for such a robust narrative brings to the fore the daunting academic and moral challenge of our time: the increasing specialization and fragmentation of scientific and ethical debates. I will briefly comment on the latter before turning to the former.

We live, for a number of complex historical reasons, in a fragmented moral universe. This fragmentation is seen in endless ethical debates and in the ultimate inability of modern moral philosophers to solve these problems and reach a common ground. According to Alasdair MacIntyre, three different accounts dominate the current ethical landscape in Western societies.¹¹³ Rooted in the Aristotelian tradition and in line with “communitarian” thinkers, MacIntyre is deeply concerned about the disorientation of current moral discourse. He believes Western civilization has reached a turning point and needs to move forward. At the end of his seminal work, *After Virtue*, he writes: “what matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.”¹¹⁴ We may or may not agree with MacIntyre’s bleak picture and local-oriented solution, but we certainly need to acknowledge the narrative and moral fragmentation of our time while facing the increasing social disintegration of many Western societies and the “dark ages” of environmental degradation that are already upon us.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Cf. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Three rival versions of moral enquiry: encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

¹¹⁴ MacIntyre, *After virtue: a study in moral theory*, 263.

¹¹⁵ Robert Putnam, from a sociological point of view, has described the increasing disconnection and social fragmentation of American communities. His analysis shows that, over the last decades, a number of factors have contributed to the decline of social life in the USA. On top of this increasing social fragmentation, we are witnessing the separation between ethnic and religious communities. Cf. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

3.2. Fragmented narratives, ethical disorientation

Perhaps somewhat ironically, the current social, political and environmental fragmentation is especially visible in our global, interconnected, multicultural cities. As I pointed out above, Jonathan Sacks is profoundly concerned about the rising and frightening social fragmentation in Western societies and has argued that a new type of covenant or “shared narrative” is required to bridge the growing cultural gap between different groups. Influenced by McIntyre, Sacks contends that story-telling is a very ancient, and indeed effective, form of society-building. A form of societal covenant is renewed through communal story-telling. Telling stories is not only “part of being human,” but a political action as well. For Sacks, contrary to what Jean-Francois Lyotard believed, we do need meta-narratives or big stories, “the ones that tell us who we are, where we came from, and what we are called on to do ... Without memory, there is no identity, and without identity we are cast adrift into a sea of chance, without compass, map or destination.”¹¹⁶ In short, without a shared narrative, there is no shared responsibility.

A similar fragmentation and disorientation affects the field of environmental ethics. Michael Northcott has described four distinct schools or perspectives on the present environmental crisis. These various approaches are not only legitimate “methodological options,” but stem from distinct understandings of human beings and their place in the world. According to Northcott, ecocentric, deontological, utilitarian, and “eco-virtuous” approaches sum up the different philosophical attempts to

¹¹⁶ Sacks, *The home we build together: recreating society*, 122. Community-building narratives need ceremonies of “covenant renewal” or civil liturgies. These and the most visible symbol of identity and continuity where this narrative is told is the family. For Sacks, American presidential speeches are a good example of this type of community-binding national narrative (Cf. *Ibid.*, Chapter 10). It is no coincidence that both Hauerwas and Sacks stress the political and ethical importance of the family. The family is the place where narratives and a sense of moral responsibility are handed over to succeeding generations.

understand and solve the current crisis. When it comes to Christian theology, humanocentric, ecocentric, and theocentric perspectives also offer different images of the human and its place in the cosmos.¹¹⁷

Willis Jenkins has analogously argued that particular anthropological and cosmological narratives influence the Christian *ethos*. These narratives are themselves shaped by patterns of basic Christian experience, what he calls “grammars of grace:” “the metaphors, logics and narratives of grace shape major patterns of Christian response to environmental problems.”¹¹⁸ This narrative or “grammatical” exploration leads Jenkins to identify three distinct theologies of grace within the Christian tradition: sanctification, redemption, and deification. These theologies correspond, broadly speaking, to three major Christian traditions: Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism, Evangelical Protestantism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, respectively. In other words, different implicit anthropologies foster different ethical approaches to the ecological crisis.

Given the present ethical fragmentation and the uncertainty of scientific predictions, it may be difficult to imagine a single, unified meta-narrative. Yet it is increasingly obvious that we certainly have, as Paul Knitter contends, “meta-problems.” One of these meta-problems, affecting us all, is the “ecological meta-problem.”¹¹⁹ We may never agree on a single narrative binding all the peoples on earth. Scientist may never be able to predict with complete certainty the effects of human action on the ecosystems. However, we can agree on a number of pressing environmental and social problems.¹²⁰ I

¹¹⁷ Cf. Northcott, *The environment and Christian ethics*, 86-163.

¹¹⁸ Willis Jenkins, *Ecologies of grace: environmental ethics and Christian theology* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

¹¹⁹ Paul Knitter, “Deep Ecumenicity versus Incommensurability” In Hessel and Ruether, *Christianity and ecology: seeking the well-being of earth and humans*, 365-381. David Hollenbach has similarly argued that liberalism, the prevailing moral paradigm shaping Western societies, and the nation state, the dominant political model, cannot handle certain “transnational problems” such as poverty and environmental degradation. The inability of current political and economic systems to solve many global problems points toward the need to rehabilitate the idea of the common good. Cf. David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 32-61.

¹²⁰ Clearly, not everyone agrees, for instance, on the real causes or even the existence of climate change. Yet this is just one of the many problems related to the environmental crisis. Depletion of fisheries, high soil erosion rates, tropical forest

have repeatedly argued that we need a common, inclusive story able to generate the binding energy and moral commitment necessary to build and sustain a common ethical project in a livable world. However, the contrary also holds true: without a shared responsibility, there will be no shared narrative. Our shared narrative is the great common ethical project of preserving the earth. This ethical project is, borrowing the title of Thomas Berry's book, "the great work" of our time.¹²¹

But let us return to Sacks for a moment. His assessment of contemporary reality is surely worth affirming. His insistence on building a common narrative in multicultural societies is accurate and timely. He argues that ethical commitment and social engagement is the first step in the shared ethical narrative we build together. Praxis precedes theory. The starting point of our shared story is our common ethical praxis. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists now live together in cities like London, New York, and Paris. We all now share the same virtual world of the internet. We have different and conflicting religious, moral, and political narratives. Yet there are common concerns and practices that can be put into dialogue in order to promote a shared civic narrative. Sacks's effort to bridge the "narrative gap" between traditions is important and needs to be taken into account. However, in spite of his bridging effort, Sacks forgets an influential and pervasive narrative: the one offered by contemporary sciences.

On the one hand, all religious traditions confront a powerful flow of rapidly-changing scientific narratives that is throwing into question the previous anthropological, cosmological, and moral stories of each tradition. The scientific narrative flow is reshaping and challenging all these previous stories.¹²² On

deforestation, loss of biodiversity, disappearance of wetlands, and a whole host of related environmental problems are well-documented.

¹²¹ Cf. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

¹²² The well-known debate on "intelligent design" is a good example of a religious effort to restate creationism in non-religious terms. Both scientists and theologians have rejected this theory. However, despite its inaccuracy, this theory not only tries to adapt the traditional teleological argument for the existence of God, but also represents an attempt to respond to the challenges posed by a "secular" evolutionary theory to religious beliefs.

the other hand, we are witnessing a rising religious fanaticism, anti-scientific attitude, and growing tension within religions. These reactions are partially due to the scientific challenge posed to traditional religious narratives.

Our world faces a dilemma that taps deep into the fragmentation brought about by modernity: we have several religious and “regional” stories alongside a powerful flow of techno-scientific narratives. According to many of our contemporaries, especially in the West, religions no longer offer an overarching view of history, humanity, and the cosmos in conformity with the narrative offered by the natural sciences. For many scientists, religions offer only a naïve, flawed story that needs to be superseded; they claim that contemporary science provides a more accurate view of the origin of life, human beings, and the universe. Moreover, as Francisco Ayala has noted, these scientific claims are often illegitimately extended into ethical prescriptions. The new scientific and old religious accounts appear to be in opposition, or at least in a very tense relationship. However, in spite of the prestige of scientific descriptions, they have not fostered a unified ethical framework and new sustaining values. As a result, elements of the “old” stories not only remain but seem to be quite resilient. Still, both religious and scientific stories thrive and cohabit in our current post-modern, scientific age. In sum, “we are in between stories.”¹²³

3.3. Science meets religion: mending the narrative?

We need a common moral ground in order to build sustainable and responsible human communities. This type of common moral ground not only should take into account scientific understandings of nature and the human being, but also will require a shared vision and a narrative capable of depicting, in

¹²³ Thomas Berry, *The dream of the earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 123.

accordance with the natural sciences, “the human place in the cosmos.”¹²⁴ In other words, we need a consistent anthropology and cosmology. A unified story of the human, I believe, will provide moral resources for human communities to find their place in the world and, hence, exercise genuine responsibility toward the natural world.

At this point in my reflection there are two options. First, I could nostalgically look back, as MacIntyre seems to propose, toward a pre-modern, unified narrative like the one that provided for centuries a common moral ground in Western Europe. Or I could try to move forward and blend together in a new synthesis the best insights from the Christian tradition, valuable perceptions from modernity, and contributions made by contemporary science. Given the accelerated pace of scientific discovery and the complexity of human response to change, this blending process will be a never-accomplished task. However, taking the road of dialogue is a necessary step in order to provide the type of narrative we desperately need to foster a renewed sense of responsibility for the future of life on the planet. This new synthesis is a major challenge to religious traditions, natural sciences, and humanities alike.

But there is still hope. Christians have faced similar challenges before. The Cappadocian Fathers creatively confronted the challenge posed by Greek philosophy to Christian beliefs in the first centuries of the Christian era. The Fathers of the Church borrowed models, metaphors, analogies, and symbols from the Greek philosophical tradition in order to create a comprehensible synthesis. This is the type of synthesis we find in the early Christian creeds of the Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon. Analogously, Thomas Aquinas created a new theological synthesis in the Middle Ages. His

¹²⁴ I borrow this expression from the title of Max Scheler’s important work on philosophical anthropology. Cf. Max Scheler, *The human place in the cosmos* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

Summa Theologiae is an effort to integrate both the rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy and previous Christian formulations. Today, we find ourselves at a similar historical crossroads.

A Ptolemaic cosmology and a biblical-based story prevailed during the medieval European period and held communities together in a single meta-narrative. This vision was widely accepted and provided a unified ethical framework. For Thomas Berry, the Black Death that swept across Europe in the mid-fourteenth century with its tragic effects was a turning point in Western history; it disturbed the previous “unified story.” According to Berry, the rise of the scientific method, Puritanism, Jansenism, the Protestant Reformation, and various eighteenth-century revolutionary movements contributed to the progressive shattering of this unified narrative. A new, challenging “secular story” in which modern science became the most authorized voice slowly emerged and has continued to be the main challenge to religious narratives. Today, we find ourselves in a situation similar to the one in which Thomas Aquinas or the Cappadocian Fathers found themselves. We need a fruitful dialogue between contemporary science and theology, a dialogue that must aim to clarify the nature of human beings and provide a consistent narrative of our place in the cosmos.

Back in the late 1920s, Max Scheler argued that the term “human being” conveys three irreconcilable ideas in the West, namely the thoughts of the Jewish-Christian tradition, ancient Greek philosophy, and the natural sciences. These three ideas “lack any underlying unity which could provide us with a common foundation.”¹²⁵ Scheler’s influential work, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, was an early attempt to bridge the gap between these different anthropological understandings and build a consistent philosophical anthropology in dialogue with both contemporary science and religion.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 5.

British theologian and biochemist Arthur Peacocke represents a renewed effort to foster this type of dialogue and bridge the widening gap between science and religion. According to Peacocke, science and theology share many things in common. Both scientific training and serious theological research involve, as the word already implies, self-discipline, openness, attentiveness, and willingness to engage in dialogue. As any committed student knows, serious research requires humility, patience, and asceticism. All these attitudes are shared by both theology and science.¹²⁶ Furthermore, both science and religion engage in realities beyond description. Both need symbols, models, and a carefully defined, metaphorical language. Both share a narrative necessity. As he notes, “both science and theology have only the resources of human language.”¹²⁷ Yet these are limited resources; human language is partial and cannot attempt to offer a complete and definite understanding of reality.

In recent decades, the acknowledged shared limitations of science and theology have also led them to re-discover a new humility. On the one hand, natural sciences have realized that they cannot answer all questions “from their own purview and by their own methods.”¹²⁸ After three hundred years of scientific inquiry, despite their great achievements, natural sciences have been unable to provide meaning and significance for the individual in the universe. They are a major source of intelligibility for humanity but cannot provide purpose and meaning for life.¹²⁹ On the other hand, as apophatic theology has underscored over the centuries, theologians must recognize that ultimately they do not know what they are talking about; that is to say, God. Theology then has to two tasks. First, it has to recognize its own

¹²⁶ Furthermore, Michael J. Himes contends that there is a profoundly sacramental (religious) dimension to all sciences: “any and every field of study is ultimately religious in nature.” Michael J. Himes, “‘Finding God in All Things’: A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects” in Thomas M. Landy (ed.), *As leaven in the world: Catholic perspectives on faith, vocation, and the intellectual life* (Franklin, Wis.: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 102.

¹²⁷ Arthur R. Peacocke, *Theology for a scientific age: being and becoming natural, divine and human* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 11.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹²⁹ Science and its offspring technology are certainly one of the most influential voices in the Western intellectual landscape. However, in the midst of a widespread environmental crisis, scientific voices have been unable to get their message across, foster commitment, influence public opinion, and politicians, and reverse the tide of ecological destruction.

radical limitation. Second, it must acknowledge that we live in a scientific age and “should seek to be at least consonant with scientific perspectives on the natural world.”¹³⁰ Edward O. Wilson has recently made a similar point: “science faces in ethics and religion its most interesting and possibly humbling challenge, while religion must somehow find the way to incorporate the discoveries of science in order to retain credibility. Religion will possess strength to the extent that it codifies and puts into enduring, poetic form the highest values of humanity consistent with empirical knowledge.”¹³¹

Over the last three centuries, natural sciences have been providing new insights regarding human nature and its place in the cosmos. Now they are painting a tableau of the human that corrects the previous modern, mechanistic view and, paradoxically, partly overlaps with the biblical understanding of the human. As Peacocke notes, there are many strands of the fabric of the sciences that “are congenital to traditional Christian theology.”¹³² Furthermore, I argue that, although several elements of our biblical tradition still need to be rethought in the light of current scientific discoveries, some of the shared narrative elements between science and religion are *already* providing a common ground in their understanding of human beings. These shared narrative elements are a coherent framework that takes account of the different dimensions of the human place in the cosmos, a common ground that offers hope in the search for a shared ethical commitment. This shared narrative is, according to Hauerwas, a form of “revealed reality” and a source of images and analogies that help us interpret human existence.¹³³ To this emerging story I now turn.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 21.

¹³¹ Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: the unity of knowledge* (New York: Random House, 1998), 265.

¹³² Peacocke, *Theology for a scientific age: being and becoming natural, divine and human*, 245.

¹³³ Cf. Hauerwas, *A community of character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic*, Chapter 3. Conversely, as I pointed out above, our shared ethical commitment for the future of life on earth promotes a shared understanding of human beings. Responsibility for the future of life on earth fosters a particular vision of the human place in the cosmos. It promotes an image of the human as deacon, server, and steward of creation.

3.4. Anthropological misunderstandings

“For although humanity may still be held to be unique and to have a distinct place in the purposes of God, this status now has to be seen as a position of responsibility for the rest of all that is created.”¹³⁴

Before I move forward in trying to flesh out the emerging anthropological themes provided by contemporary science and contemporary Christian theology, an important point has to be acknowledged: neither the Christian Church nor the natural sciences have an “official anthropology.” There is no single, unified understanding of human beings. If we look at the Bible and the Christian tradition, we will find several implicit perspectives of the human and its place in the cosmos. If we look at the humanities and the natural sciences, we also face a plurality of views. The very term human being is indeed ambiguous and, as I pointed out above, conveys several meanings. I contend, however, that there are basic theological themes that outline a sound Christian anthropology in accordance with contemporary scientific understandings.

My purpose in this final part of the chapter is threefold. First, I summarize, taking the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* as a guide, the basic elements of a Christian anthropology while trying to clarify the meaning of the contested doctrinal theme of the *Imago Dei*. Second, I argue that Charles Taylor’s critique of modern, “atomistic” anthropologies parallels some of the corrections made to “modern worldviews” by contemporary science. Finally, I suggest that defining anthropological elements shared by both contemporary science and Christian theology converge in an emergent vision of human beings as persons-in-relation. This emerging anthropological theme, I argue, is a provisional common ground upon which a shared ethical commitment can be fostered.

¹³⁴ Peacocke, *Theology for a scientific age: being and becoming natural, divine and human*, 248.

3.4.1. A renewed *imago Dei*

Gaudium et Spes (GS) offers a sound synthesis of Christian anthropology.¹³⁵ The Church believes that human beings were created, out of love, in the image of God. The *Imago Dei* doctrinal theme occupies a central place in theological anthropology. This doctrine affirms that humans are created “in the image of God” in order to enjoy personal communion with the Trinity and with one another. Moreover, all of creation – not only humans – is made out of love. Love, companionship, and communion – not isolation or autonomy – express the profound human identity. As the Council notes, “God did not create man as a solitary” (GS, 12). Although man finds his true identity in community, the mystery of sin compels him to break this communion; hence “man is split within himself.” This division has personal, communitarian, and cosmic consequences. In breaking the original communion, “man has disrupted also his proper relationship to his own ultimate goal as well as his whole relationship toward himself and others and all created things” (GS, 13).

However, in spite of sin and its dire effects, man is still one. In contrast to dualistic understandings of humans, the Council argues that humans are a unity of body and soul. Moreover, through their bodies, as natural sciences affirm, humans are chemically and biologically intertwined with the natural world: “through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world” (GS, 14). Put in more classical terms, humans are a *micro-cosmos*; they are deeply connected to and dependent on the natural world, and this connection is indeed good. Humans are, through their bodies, an integral part of the cycles of energy and matter in the cosmos. Furthermore, because of their material nature, like all other living beings, they grow, deteriorate, and disintegrate. A person is utterly finite and limited and, at some point, has to face “the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person.” (GS, 18)

¹³⁵ Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. In http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Accessed February 2011.

Of all these long-held Christian anthropological claims I have just summarized, the *imago Dei* is the one that has come, especially after the modern period, under systematic critique. According to the International Theological Commission (ITC), secular critics, modern science, and twentieth-century Western theology have criticized the theme of the *imago Dei*.¹³⁶ Contemporary critics blame this particular theological theme for fostering flawed “anthropocentric” claims while promoting a disregard for the natural environment.

However, although the theme of the *imago Dei* has been widely criticized, the Catholic tradition has recently reaffirmed its centrality for Christian faith while addressing these critiques. The ITC has acknowledged the emphasis on human dominion over nature and the influence of dualistic anthropologies, both Platonic and Cartesian, within Christian theology. These negative influences have been present in one form or another throughout Christian history and need to be purged. The *imago Dei* has been reformulated by the ITC as follows: “the human person as a whole is the bearer of the divine image in a spiritual as well as a bodily dimension” (ITC, 31). The recovery and emphasis on the “bodily dimension” not only corrects previous dualistic distortions, but also undergirds my thesis of an emerging anthropology of persons-in-relation (with both their bodies and the whole cosmos) in accordance with the Christian tradition and contemporary science.

In summary, the bodily dimension of human beings matters for a number of reasons: it is an integral part of the theological theme of the *imago Dei*, is essential to personal identity, underscores human kinship with other life forms, helps us locate our place in the cosmos, and, indirectly, fosters “responsible stewardship of the created world” (ITC, 4). As the ITC concludes, “the theme of the *imago*

¹³⁶ Cf. International Theological Commission. “Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God,” In http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html. Accessed February 2011.

Dei has demonstrated its systematic power in clarifying many truths of the Christian faith. It helps us to present a relational - and indeed personal - conception of human beings” (ITC, 95).

3.4.2. Atomistic anthropologies

It is perhaps permissible at this point in the reflection to turn our attention to the work of Charles Taylor in order to unveil some of the underlying assumptions of modern anthropology. Taylor has argued that a particular vision of human beings and society fostered the rise of social contract theories in the seventeenth century. Since that time, the success of these theories in the West, especially the English-speaking world, has made rights-theory the paradigm of political thought. For Taylor, this paradigm makes anthropological claims and tells a very particular story about the human being and its place in society and the world. The main anthropological claim underlying modern Western societies and politics deals with the self-sufficiency of the individual. Human beings in society are “atoms” or individuals, while society is the sum and interaction of these individuals.

This atomic anthropology “represents a view about human nature and the human condition which makes a doctrine of the primacy of rights plausible.”¹³⁷ However, the main contradiction of atomism is that rights cannot be defended without first affirming the worth of “human capacities” that go well beyond atomistic assumptions. According to Taylor, these human capacities are “the right to life, to freedom ... to the exercise of their moral or religious beliefs.”¹³⁸ Human capacities shape the very identity and autonomy of the individual. As Taylor argues, human capacities are generated in a “social matrix”. In other words, “atomic individuals” cannot generate by themselves the very distinctive

¹³⁷ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the human sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 189. Authors like Michael Himes and John B. Cobb, Jr. have similarly argued that underneath the ecological debate lies a profound anthropological debate. Cf. John B. Cobb, *Sustainability: economics, ecology, and justice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992), 11. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, *Fullness of faith: the public significance of theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 114.

¹³⁸ Taylor, *Philosophy and the human sciences*, 193.

features upon which they rely.¹³⁹ Hence, for Taylor, the modern claim of an independent individual in an idealized and “natural state” is built upon a flawed story. Human capacities are not developed in a wild and isolated state but in the family and the broader history of a culture or civilization. Every culture is a socially-constructed narrative given to the individual. Furthermore, so-called “human capacities” are not just something given to be used, but an invitation for personal responsibility and concern for the culture that provided them. As Taylor contends, “any proof that these capacities can only develop in society or in a society of a certain kind is a proof that we ought to belong to or sustain society or this kind of society.”¹⁴⁰ In short, we cannot develop the “capacity to be responsible” unless we first move beyond “atomistic anthropologies” and offer a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the human place in the cosmos.

Environmental ethics is not the major concern for Taylor, yet his reflection makes a valuable contribution to the topic of this study. As we try to move beyond the current narrative impasse, Taylor’s critique of modern anthropology appears as a useful stepping stone on our way. We aim to build livable human societies in harmony with the natural world. We want to foster livable and sustainable human communities where human and nonhumans can live together. As a result, we need a common narrative, sound anthropology, and sense of belonging to a shared ethical project. Modern atomistic and mechanistic views of the human (and the cosmos) are unable to provide an accurate narrative and foster a shared ethical response. The story told by atomistic anthropologies has proven too weak to promote the desired responsibility.

¹³⁹ Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb have also criticized the flawed anthropology undergirding Adam Smith’s economic thought: “In Smith’s vision, individuals are viewed as capable of relating themselves to others in diverse ways, basically either in benevolence or in self-love, but they are not constituted by these relationships or by any others. They exist in fundamental separation from one another, and from this position of separatedness they relate.” Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, *For the common good: redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 160.

¹⁴⁰ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the human sciences*, 197.

3.4.3. Human beings as persons-in-relation: An emerging anthropology?

“Christians have the responsibility to locate the modern scientific understanding of the universe within the context of the theology of creation. The place of human beings in the history of this evolving universe, as it has been charted by modern sciences, can only be seen in its complete reality in the light of faith, as a personal history of the engagement of the triune God with creaturely persons” (ITC, 62).

Both misunderstandings of the *imago Dei* and flawed atomistic anthropologies have distorted the primeval human reality, namely that we are integral parts of the cosmos or “beings-in-relation” rather than vagrant sovereigns or isolated individuals. Renewed theological interest in the *imago Dei* theme, widespread critique of the modern agenda, and “correcting” insights of contemporary sciences are helping to remedy these misunderstandings. From these diverse influences, a new narrative of the human is slowly emerging.

First, both science and religion argue that humans are an intrinsic part of the natural world. We are deeply connected to and dependent on the geo-bio-chemical cycles of the earth. As the ITC notes, “human beings have developed a heightened awareness that they are organically linked with other living beings” (ITC, 71). The belief in human autonomy and detachment from the natural world has to be nuanced. While acknowledging the “special place” of human beings in the natural world, we need to acknowledge the radical dependence and interconnection of all beings of earth. Moreover, we are not only connected with the planet through our bodies, but we are also organically linked to the energy and geo-bio-chemical exchanges of the universe. Furthermore, we are genetically related to all forms of life as well. We live in an evolutionary universe and share a common kinship with all other living beings. In spite of our specific role in the natural world, great technological achievements, medical breakthroughs, and amazing transformative power, both science and religion realize that human life on earth is deeply related and totally dependent on basic natural elements like water, oxygen, minerals, plants, and animals.

Second, like all other living beings on earth, human beings are finite and radically limited. We not only depend on other beings for our survival, but our bodily life is temporal and, as Martin Heidegger argued, is ultimately oriented toward death. The physically and temporally finite reality of life has been a central theme in contemporary philosophy and a classical strand of religious literature. No matter how effective we are at prolonging life through medical treatment, eventually all human beings die and disintegrate. The temporal limitation of human life is both a bottom line and an excellent springboard in the dialogue between science and religion. Not only does death lie at the heart of religious experience, but it also raises the question of meaning and fosters a more humble approach to all human endeavors, both scientific and theological. As I contended in the previous chapter, anything we have, our very own life included, is a given or a “gift.” This experience lies at the heart of the sacramental vision. Furthermore, life is a mystery we cannot fully grasp. Being humble “is the realization that there is no intrinsic reason for one’s being at all.”¹⁴¹ In other words, the experience of death and human limitation is a radical challenge for both religion and science. It raises the question of meaning, fosters humility, lies at the heart of the sacramental experience of gift-exchange, and is one of the Catholic entry points to environmental ethics.

Third, human beings, like all other entities in the cosmos, are both complex interrelated unities and multi-leveled realities. As Peacocke argues, modern methodologically reductionist science was based on an intuitive, natural distinction between matter and space. This reductionist methodology was operative until well into the twentieth century. According to this scientific methodology, “the observable structures and entities of the natural world were successively, and successfully, broken down into smaller and smaller component units ... admittedly very small bits but nevertheless essentially tiny

¹⁴¹ Himes and Himes, *Fullness of faith: the public significance of theology*, 111.

particles.”¹⁴² However, in the twentieth century, Einstein’s theory of relativity and Planck’s quantum physics blurred the lines between matter, space, time, and energy while shattering the previous Newtonian view of the world. Contemporary sciences have not only corrected the mechanistic metaphor of the modern worldview, but also fostered a more organic understanding of the cosmos as a “complex hierarchy of systems.”¹⁴³ Furthermore, because of the spread-out character of matter, contemporary physics and biology affirm that “all living organisms live in intricate systems consisting of many cross-flows and exchanges of energy and matter that constitute labyrinths of sometimes baffling complexity.”¹⁴⁴ This baffling complexity and deep interconnection of all beings at the atomic level not only corrects flawed mechanistic understandings of nature and dualistic anthropologies, but also fosters a more humble approach to the ultimate mystery of nature and humans. The new emerging understanding of nature (and human beings) provided by contemporary science promotes the sense of awe and mystery that lies at the heart of religious experience, raises ultimate questions of meaning, acknowledges the limitation of human knowledge, and provides a common ground for dialogue between all sciences.¹⁴⁵

Fourth, mechanistic worldviews and dualistic separations between body and soul, *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, have been theoretically superseded in recent decades by both contemporary science and Christianity. Planck’s quantum theory brought an end to the worldview of Newtonian physics. Charles Darwin proved the genetic kinship of all living beings in an evolutionary world. However, in spite of the deep physical and evolutionary interconnection of all entities in the cosmos, the Christian faith argues that the line between human and non-human beings and the line between material (visible) and spiritual

¹⁴² Peacocke, *Theology for a scientific age: being and becoming natural, divine and human*, 33.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴⁵ The ITC has affirmed that “particular actions of God bring about effects that transcend the capacity of created causes acting according to their natures. The appeal to divine causality to account for genuinely causal as distinct from merely explanatory gaps does not insert divine agency to fill in the “gaps” in human scientific understanding ... The structures of the world can be seen as open to non-disruptive divine action in directly causing events in the world” (ITC, 70).

(invisible) dimensions of reality cannot be completely blurred.¹⁴⁶ The Catholic tradition warns against strictly materialistic theories of human origins “and insists on the relevance of philosophy and theology for an adequate understanding of the ‘ontological leap’ to the human which cannot be explained in purely scientific terms” (ITC, 64).¹⁴⁷ We are indeed, as the ITC has affirmed, “organically linked with other living beings” (ITC, 71).¹⁴⁸ Yet this connection does not imply a strictly “egalitarian” relationship with the natural world. A nuanced formulation of the *imago Dei* theme rejects the paradigm of absolute human “dominion” over nature which Christianity has been accused of fostering, while encouraging a more “ministerial” understanding of the human role in the cosmos. Hence human “lordship” not only encourages stewardship toward the natural world, but also grounds Christian environmental ethics in creation theology. In other words, human interconnection with the natural world makes room to understand nature as a space of deep communion where humans play a key ministerial role.

Finally, humans are beings-in-relation. Humanity is not only “housed” in the created cosmos, but also spans all levels of complexity – from atomic and molecular structures to sophisticated cultural systems – and is a member of the larger “biotic community” or “earth system.” The openness and relational character of human beings, as we have seen, is underscored by both contemporary science and Christian theology. Human “relationality” taps deep into the sources of the biblical religions. Christian tradition provides “a relational – and indeed personal – conception of human beings. It is precisely the personal relationship with God which defines human beings and founds their relationships with other creatures” (ITC, 95). The natural world is “the ‘original gift,’ that establishes a ‘space’ of personal communion”

¹⁴⁶ So-called “deep ecologies” and pantheistic tendencies within Christian theology tend to cross this line, blurring the difference between the human and all other entities in the universe. Ratzinger underscores the importance of “making room” for the invisible. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004).

¹⁴⁷ For Karl Rahner, realities like responsibility and freedom are “transcendental realities.” They point to the transcendental dimension of human experience and cannot be “objectified in a subsequent scientific reflection.” Rahner, *Foundations of Christian faith: an introduction to the idea of Christianity*, 37. “Regional” or “empirical” anthropologies need the broader perspective offered by philosophical and theological anthropology.

¹⁴⁸ Put in theological terms, “the divine communion now finds itself ‘housed’ in the created cosmos” (ITC, 74).

(ITC, 74). A space of personal communion is best understood as a form of relational love that imitates the love of the three persons of the Trinity.¹⁴⁹

In summary, important anthropological themes have emerged over the last century. Human beings are intrinsic parts of the natural world, complex interrelated unities, radically limited and finite creatures, and responsible stewards of a natural world understood as a space of communion, interdependence, and creativity. These emerging themes do not provide a definitive, unified story of the human, but offer a coherent framework that takes account of the various dimensions of the human place in the cosmos. This framework does not, of course, solve all our current ethical and philosophical problems. But it does depict a more holistic view of human beings as interrelated with and dependent on the earth ecosystems. This nuanced understanding of the human indirectly provides ethical resources to tackle the current ecological problems while bridging the “narrative gap” between natural sciences, the humanities, and religion. As I argued at the beginning of this chapter, an understanding of the human as person-in-community matches traditional Christian insights, corrects misinterpretations of the *imago Dei* theme, fosters the idea of indebtedness, and promotes a shared responsibility for the well-being of future generations and the earth ecosystems.

In this chapter, I have tried to address the narrative character of Christian responsibility toward the natural world. Science does not tell stories characterized by deep human meaning; it describes the natural world and offers explanatory hypothesis of its inner functioning. Religions tell stories that offer meaning and moral guidance. In the dialogue between science and religion, important anthropological themes upon which a more holistic and humble story of the human can be built have emerged. These

¹⁴⁹ Herman Daly and John Cobb’s alternative approach to the economy is based in an understanding of the human as “person-in-community.” Cf. Daly and Cobb, *For the common good: redirecting the economy toward community, the environment, and a sustainable future*, 159-175.

themes establish a common ground for a more nuanced understanding of the human and its place in the cosmos.

However, narratives are never just descriptive; they convey a direction and a purpose. The understanding of human beings as “responsible person-in-community” or “steward of God’s creation” underscores the ministerial character of Christian responsibility while pointing toward the ethical direction of this eco-ministry: the promotion of the common good and the well-being of all life-forms on Earth. It is toward this direction that I now turn.

4. Christian responsibility for the common good

4.1. The common good: aim and purpose of Christian responsibility

The widespread and relentless ecological degradation of the earth has made two things clear: a) the inability of current economic and political systems to reverse the tide of destruction in many ecosystems; and b) the inability to preserve the common good for present and future generations. David Hollenbach has noted that “creative response to some of the pressing social problems emerging today will require a considerably stronger commitment to the common good than we now have.”¹⁵⁰ The environmental crisis is one of these pressing problems. I argue in this final chapter that the relentless destruction of the earth’s ecosystems is not only a major historical shift in the human-earth relation, but also an opportunity to revisit the ancient idea of the common good.

An ecologically-reconstructed common good is a rich and powerful symbol that can orient human responsibility toward the natural world. The review of this concept expands and translates its meaning into modern terms and makes it available again for moral and political thought. It will not be possible, of course, to explore the complexity and richness of the various meanings and uses of “common good” within the compass of this chapter. Yet I argue that a renewed understanding of this term not only parallels the required expansion of other moral concepts (such as responsibility), but also offers a privileged vantage point in the understanding of the current crisis while grounding Christian environmental ethics in Catholic Social Teaching.

The previous chapter contended that human beings are intrinsic parts of the cosmos, interrelated unities, finite creatures, and responsible stewards of a natural world understood as a space of

¹⁵⁰ Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, 31. According to Hollenbach, this concept was eclipsed, for a number of historical reasons, in the modern period. This eclipse parallels the rise of liberalism and atomistic anthropologies discussed in the previous chapter.

communion, interdependence, and creativity. This developing view of the human place in the cosmos parallels the emerging understanding of the earth's ecosystems as a global common good, a good that is being increasingly threatened. In the light of this perception, the present environmental crisis is not only an opportunity to understand human beings as responsible persons-in-relation and the natural world as a common good, but also a chance to urgently re-orient Christian responsibility. In order to re-direct this concept, I undertake two tasks.

First, I offer an historical overview of the common good. This review shows that both secular and Christian understandings of this moral and political term overlook important intergenerational and environmental dimensions and do not suffice to address our unprecedented situation.¹⁵¹ Second, in spite of the difficulty of providing a definitive understanding of the common good, I argue that the earth's ecosystems are not only God's creation, but also the "primeval common good." Moreover, I claim that human communities and the earth's ecosystems upon which they rely form a single "earth system" where the preservation of the common good becomes a moral priority. An expanded and ecologically-reconstructed common good becomes a powerful symbol in an age of social and environmental breakdown. This is one of the emerging cultural stories of our time, a story that is calling for a much greater practice of shared responsibility.

4.1.1. Overlooked dimensions of the common good

Any human community, viable republic (*res publica*) or common good is grounded in and sustained by the earth's ecosystems. The earth's ecosystems offer water, air, soil, and all types of resources that

¹⁵¹ As Hans Jonas has argued, political and moral terms need to be reframed within the current technological era. However, because of the accelerated changes of our age, a final definition of the common good is difficult to reach. As A. Nemetz and T. Massaro put bluntly, "it is simply impossible to define the common good in a final way irrespective of the changing social conditions." A. Nemetz, "The Common Good," in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2003), vol. 4, 16. Cf. John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, n. 65. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html. Accessed December 2010.

sustain the very existence of human societies; these resources are a basic dimension of the common good that has long been forgotten or undervalued. Any adequate review of this concept will have to expand upon the narrow anthropocentric perspective and include environmental and intergenerational dimensions in the understanding of the common good. Before continuing, however, I will pause and offer a brief historical overview of the concept of the common good and try to establish my first point: the common good has traditionally been thought of as an exclusively human-centered concept within a local or regional political community in a limited temporal framework.

For Aristotle, the highest of all practical goods is human happiness. Justice produces and conserves this good of the political association and thus becomes central in the quest for it. Aristotle argues that “even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, it is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve and preserve that of a community; for while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of an individual, to do so in the case of a people or a state is something finer and more sublime.”¹⁵² The common good of the individual, then, has to be somehow subordinated to the good of the community. However, Aristotle does not consider non-human or future generations to be intrinsic parts of the good of the *polis*. Rather, he focuses on an exclusively human community in which friendship will become a necessity. Friendship, for Aristotle, is “justice in the fullest sense;”¹⁵³ it is a form of relationship that holds the *polis* together. From Aristotle we learn that the preservation of the common good will require different degrees of friendship and just relationships. For him, “proportional reciprocation” is the basis of all fair exchange and is also needed to hold the human community together.¹⁵⁴ The fact that this economic and friendship-based human exchange requires natural resources

¹⁵² Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), Book I. ii.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, Book VIII. i.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, Book V. v.

and indirectly includes the relationship to future generations is something Aristotle simply did not consider.

Cicero, building upon Aristotle's definition, understands the commonwealth as the property of an assemblage of people "associated in an agreement with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good."¹⁵⁵ Augustine borrows Cicero's definition of the common good in Book II of *The City of God* and revises it in Book XIX. He first affirms that a people is "an assemblage associated by a common acknowledgment of right and by a community of interests."¹⁵⁶ Further on he will argue that "a people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love."¹⁵⁷ The *res publica* belongs to the people and requires agreement on justice and law. Furthermore, it also requires public commitment and a shared object of love to hold the community together. Ancient definitions of community rely on human-centered concepts such as rationality, justice, partnership, and love. These descriptions did not – and probably could not – include the environment and a wider spatial-temporal framework into the definition of the common good.

Along these lines, Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the *res publica* offers some points of overlap with that of Cicero and Augustine. The end of the law and the purpose of politics is the common good. Justice for Aquinas also plays a key role; it is the most important moral virtue and directs all other virtues to the common good.¹⁵⁸ Justice seems to consist only of relations to others –human beings (Cf. ST II-II, q58.a2). However, Aquinas's distinctions between general/particular and distributive/commutative justice seem promising for a revised definition of the common good. These

¹⁵⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De re publica; De legibus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1928), 65.

¹⁵⁶ Augustine, *The City of God* (N.Y.: The Modern Library, 2000), XIX, 21.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, XIX, 24. It is interesting to note that James Nash builds his environmental ethics upon the idea of love. Cf. Nash, *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*. For Augustine, the Roman republic did not collapse because of Christianity but rather for a kind of morality that "brought on the rupture and corruption of their voluntary association." This connection between moral corruption and social breakdown would be worth studying in the wider context of Western consumerism and global environmental degradation.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q58.a6. In <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>. Accessed March 2011.

distinctions make room for a broader understanding of justice in its relation to the common good of future generations and an expanded political community. Further on in the *Summa*, Aquinas argues that distributive justice “distributes common goods to individual persons proportionally” (ST II-II, q61.a1). Aquinas does not define these goods, but they certainly go well beyond exclusive human economic exchange; they include “natural goods” and have to do with the broader community in space and time.¹⁵⁹

More than six centuries after Aquinas wrote the *Summa*, Pope Leo XIII inaugurated a new style of papal writings called “social encyclicals.” These encyclicals constitute the central message of modern Catholic Social Teaching. Reflecting on the condition of workers on the eve of the twentieth century, Leo XIII argued that the institution of private ownership of the earth’s resources should serve the common interest of all. In his own words, “however the earth may be apportioned among private owners, it does not cease to serve the common interests of all.”¹⁶⁰

Seventy years after the publication of *Rerum Novarum*, during the Second Vatican Council, John XXIII reaffirmed Leo’s commitment to the defense of the common good while defining it as the purpose of the public authority.¹⁶¹ Within the post-World War II climate of support of human rights, the pope affirms in *Pacem in Terris* (PT) that heads of state must create a climate in which “the individual can both safeguard his own rights and fulfill his duties” (PT, 63). Civil authorities must insure basic human rights, foster economic and social progress, and work for the common good. Furthermore, the pope goes so far as to affirm that the common good is “the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities” (PT,

¹⁵⁹ Aquinas’ interesting remark on the “social mortgage” of private goods prevents an exclusive private ownership in case of dire necessity (Cf. ST II-II, q61.a7). This mortgage of private goods has latter been restated in CST. Could this exception be extended to the “pressing need” to preserve the common good for future generations? And, if so, is there also an environmental and future-oriented mortgage on our use of the earth’s resources?

¹⁶⁰ Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, n. 14. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html. Accessed December 2010.

¹⁶¹ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 53. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html. Accessed December 2010.

54). Civil authorities “must strive to promote the common good in the interest of all, without favoring any individual citizen or category of citizen” (PT, 56).

Two years before the publication of *Pacem in Terris*, while reflecting on the adjustment between wages and profits, Pope John XXIII himself had affirmed that “[the wage adjustment] must take into account the demands of the common good of the particular country and of the whole human family” (MM, 78). The common good, for the Pope, demands employment of the highest possible number, care for the least privileged, and the restriction of economic inequalities (Cf. MM, 79). In introducing a broader understanding of the common good, the Pope acknowledged that scientific and technological progress will have to take into account coming generations in an increasingly globalized world (Cf. MM, 79). However, in spite of the progressive “expansion” of the idea of the common good, a naïve view of the effects of technological and scientific progress and the “intergenerational mortgage” that it entails pervades these papal encyclicals.

Short after John XXIII’s death, the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, defined the common good as “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (GS, 26). Yet, despite the growing awareness of global interdependence and the existence of a unique “human family,” the Council fathers at Vatican II failed to include the environment in the definition of the common good.

John Paul II is the first pope to explicitly acknowledge the gravity of the ecological crisis and its connection with human development. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS), the pope states “the need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature and to take them into account when planning for development, rather than sacrificing them to certain demagogic ideas about the latter. Today this is

called ecological concern” (SRS, 26). This brief mention of the “ecological concern” would come to be further developed in *Centesimus Annus*. On the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the Pope connects a misguided understanding of development and the problem of consumerism with what he calls “the ecological question.” At the heart of this question, for the Pope, “lies an anthropological error.”¹⁶² The importance of providing a robust anthropology, then, remains a central task for Christian theology. John Paul II’s awareness of the “ecological problem,” however, contrasts with his reluctance to use the idea of the common good more extensively. The Pope’s critique of communism is probably the reason for this omission in his teachings. In summary, papal social encyclicals underscore the importance of the common good, show growing concern for the environment, and point toward solidarity and authentic human development to solve the “ecological problem.”

From this brief excursion into the sources of our contemporary understandings of the common good, one point can be drawn that will permeate the remainder of this chapter: the common good has traditionally been interpreted as a human matter in a limited span of time and space. In contrast with the locally and temporarily limited framework of many ancient concepts, the idea of the common good has not only come to the fore of ethical debates, but is also being expanded in order to include future generations and non-human realities. This expansion is not only a challenge; it is a privileged opportunity to rethink the meaning of the common good.

4.1.2. Challenge and opportunity

The European expansion of the sixteenth century started a process now called globalization. In recent decades, this process, of which the environmental degradation of the planet is just one of many facets,

¹⁶² John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 37. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html. Accessed December 2010.

has accelerated the interaction between human societies and the ecosystems upon which they rely. This complex historical process and the subsequent accelerated devastation of the earth's ecosystems, paradoxically, have fostered the conscience of a "global common good." This crisis is not only a daunting challenge for the future of life on earth, but an excellent opportunity to debunk false anthropological claims, re-discover forgotten religious insights, and understand human vocation as one of responsible care for the earth. This crisis is an historical opportunity to responsibly choose our guiding symbols.

Roman Catholic Social Teaching is increasingly aware of the ecological dimension of the common good and is already making an important contribution to the ongoing debate. In recent years, the financial meltdowns, increasing nuclear proliferation, worldwide migrations, and global terrorist threats have made the international community realize that certain problems require a joint effort. Otherwise they will not be solved. Global warming and other related environmental problems could be included within this category of global "pressing issues." Extreme weather events, depletion of fisheries, topsoil erosion, desertification, and high biological extinction rates are by no means restricted by national boundaries or cultural identities. We cannot afford strictly national or even regional approaches while addressing these challenges; by their very nature they are global. Solutions may well be both local and global. Yet a healthy environment in a just, livable world is a "global common good" that we need to preserve together.

The rampant degradation of our global common good and the breakdown of many communities, then, becomes an opportunity to rethink the common good and our lifestyles.¹⁶³ As Northcott argues, "it may be that climate change offers not only a decisive moment in the earth's history, but a post-industrial way

¹⁶³ As Michael Northcott has argued, "The potential of climate change negotiations to link nations across the world in a collective effort to preserve the global commons of the climate is huge." Michael S. Northcott, *A moral climate: the ethics of global warming* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2007), 159.

of conceiving of earth-human relations.”¹⁶⁴ It “presents modern energy-dependent cultures with a serious limit problem. It also raises profound questions. What is life for?”¹⁶⁵ These kinds of questions foster reflection and move us in our quest for a reconstructed common good.

4.2. Human communities *and* the environment: An earth community?

One of the problems we face in the midst of the current crisis, it seems, is how to define community adequately. This difficulty in defining precisely what is meant is shared with many terms I have been using in this work, such as human being, nature, or responsibility. The term community is ambiguous and conveys several meanings. In the effort to include non-human beings and future generations in the idea of the common good, one can be either too broad and therefore vague or too narrow and hence strictly anthropocentric. Anthropocentrism and pantheism are the two extremes I seek to avoid while looking for an adequate understanding of community and the common good. Many definitions of community have been proposed over the course of the centuries. Let us consider, for example, Robert Bellah’s contemporary attempt at defining community:

“Community is a group of *people* who are *socially interdependent*, who participate together in *discussion and decision making*, and who *share certain practices* that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a *history* and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past.”¹⁶⁶

It is obvious that Bellah, like Aristotle, Augustine, and the tradition of CST, thinks of community in terms of a “human community.” Only humans are rational beings, socially interdependent, and share common practices. The environment or natural world plays two roles in this definition. First, it sets the

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 181.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 208.

¹⁶⁶ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 333. Italics mine.

context for the sustenance of human communities and, second, it is dependent on human decisions for its very stability. Plants, animals, and whole ecosystems sustain human life on earth and, conversely, they increasingly depend on human decisions for their very survival.¹⁶⁷ Non-human beings, however, cannot participate as “full members” of the community. In other words, non-human beings and, to a certain extent, future generations have not been granted full membership in the human community. The question now is whether it is legitimate to extend the idea of community to non-human beings, and if so, in what sense and to what extent?

In an effort to bring non-human beings and future generations into a single community while seeking to inspire a sense of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of all, the term “earth community” has been proposed by some environmental ethicists and international agencies.¹⁶⁸ Larry Rasmussen has argued in *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* that creation “is the great community” and nature is a “genuine community.”¹⁶⁹ The problem is that both Rasmussen and the Earth Charter neither define community nor describe the practical consequences entailed in such an understanding of an earth community. We could consider, as Rasmussen affirms, “nature as a subject of high moral standing.”¹⁷⁰ But again, what does it mean that a non-human being is a subject? Would this road take us too close to Peter Singer’s position in *Animal Liberation*?¹⁷¹

We need to affirm that non-human beings (and future human generations) are not full members of the human community; they are not part of the common good as it has been proposed in the past. However,

¹⁶⁷ Non-living elements such as oxygen, minerals, and water, however, do not require human agency since they constitute the structure upon which all life forms depend.

¹⁶⁸ The Earth Charter, for example, states: “To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked. Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.” Cf. <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org/content/pages/Read-the-Charter.html>. Accessed February 2011.

¹⁶⁹ Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth Community, Earth Ethics* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 325.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹⁷¹ Cf. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (N.Y.: Random House, 1990).

they are directly and indirectly related to the well-being of present human communities and still need to be somehow included in the equation of the common good. Not only do we need oxygen, water, and food for our survival, but also particular landscapes, plants, and animals (pets) nurture our aesthetic, affective, and spiritual well-being. As Christians, we also believe that they reflect God's work in creation and have value in themselves. Non-human beings and future generations need to be valued, preserved, and taken into account appropriately. Yet how can this inclusion process be described? At this point in the reflection, contemporary science's insights are again helpful.

Contemporary sciences depict a relational tableau of human beings while offering a framework for ethical reflection. The birth and rise of evolutionary biology, ecology, ethology, and weather science in recent decades are just a few examples of the importance of modern scientific insights in the quest for a reconstructed idea of the common good. As I argued in the previous chapter, ecology and ethology shattered the seventeenth-century "mechanical" understandings of non-human life. These emerging sciences show that animals and plants form complex societies. The terms population and community are currently being applied to non-human realities. For these new sciences, human beings and all living creatures are systemically connected by the energy and carbon cycles of the planet and form a single eco-system. The interconnection of all beings on earth and the emergent idea of a single earth system are good examples of these new insights that parallel the return of the concept of the common good. However, these new scientific understandings and the emerging idea of a single earth system are not mere descriptions; they convey meaning and raise questions that go well beyond scientific inquiry. As Northcott contends, "this idea of a common root for all human beings has tremendous moral implications, for it indicates that all cultures, nations and peoples share a common earth story."¹⁷²

¹⁷² Ibid., 162. Paradoxically, these scientific insights often seem to come close to ancient religious visions. The biblical creation account and the scientific evolutionary inquiry show a high degree of convergence. As Francisco Ayala argues,

Contemporary sciences show that humans are not only dependent on the earth's biochemical cycles and energy flows, but also genetically connected to all other living beings. Humans share a common genetic code or "family history" with all other life forms. All beings on earth rely upon each other for basic, common needs. The air we breathe, the water we drink, and the foods we eat render us completely dependent on the environment. Living beings are the nexus of a wide web or network of complex dependencies where competition, predation, parasitism, symbiosis, mutualism, and commensalism play their role.¹⁷³ Soil, water, minerals, energy, air, and nutrients are constantly flowing and nourishing the complex fabric of life on earth. These flows of energy and matter are the primeval common good of the earth system.

However, members of highly industrialized and urbanized societies have difficulty keeping this picture in mind and tend to disconnect human life from the earth's cycles and rhythms. Despite the rapid flow of information and worldwide exchange of capital and goods, contemporary societies forget their relation to the environment and the single earth system. We take for granted natural environmental patterns, like water and air circulation, and tend to think of human communities as isolated, self-sufficient realities. Yet recent political and economic crises (such as wars or financial bankruptcies) and environmental disasters (such as oil spills or nuclear meltdowns) not only demonstrate that we are not related, but also remind us of a deeper interconnection between human communities and the earth system.¹⁷⁴

Darwin's theory of evolution does not necessarily conflict with religious beliefs, but rather is a gift to both science and religion. Cf. Francisco Jose Ayala, *Darwin's gift to science and religion* (Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2007).

¹⁷³ Cf. Herbert McCabe, *Ethics and the Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness* (N.Y.; London: Continuum, 2005), 96-100.

¹⁷⁴ As Larry Rasmussen has pointed out, "we are forever borrowing." (Rasmussen, *Earth community, Earth ethics*, 103). Human beings cannot live without society or natural resources like water, food, or food. We depend on both human societies and the single earth system. For the connection between environmental degradation, politics, and social conflict: Mohamed Suliman (ed.), *Ecology, Politics & Violent Conflict* (N.Y.: Zed Books, 1999).

Scientists stress the importance of complex, multilayered interactions and the need to preserve the “wholeness” of the ecosystem. In an effort to preserve genetic diversity, we may create gene banks or freeze animal sperm and eggs. However, complex ecosystems like tropical rainforests cannot be recreated once they have been destroyed. Individuals and species cannot be preserved in the long run outside of an ecosystem. The good of the ecosystem, then, has an inevitable priority over the good of particular communities and individuals.¹⁷⁵

We need to promote a new, more inclusive vision of human communities, a vision where the common good of the community is expanded beyond local and human boundaries while affirming the distinctive role played by humans.¹⁷⁶ Keeping in mind the positive political and social contributions of modernity and liberalism, we need to affirm that the doctrine of the primacy of individual rights over the well-being of future generations and the well-being of the earth system is dangerous and misguided. Both Northcott and Hollenbach have noted that there is a correlation between the rise of liberalism and the fall of the common good.¹⁷⁷ Conversely, the current rise of an environmentally-reconstructed common good is throwing into question some of the liberal assumptions that undergird current political and economic systems.

¹⁷⁵ Along these lines, Northcott’s standing seems to be influenced by James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis. According to Lovelock’s vision, the world is a finely-balanced relational nexus of life forms where humans appear dependent on the bio-geo-chemical cycles of the earth’s systems. According to Northcott, this interconnection is ignored by modern ethical, economic, and political theories. As Northcott argues, “the modern moral climate is then a construct of three assumptions: that the human moral agent is an *autonomous reasoning sovereign*, that human economic exchange is a realm of contractual mediation between *autonomous agents*, and that the social contract is *relationally independent* of the cause-effect mechanism of the cosmos.” (Northcott, *A moral climate: the ethics of global warming*, 70-71. Italics my emphasis). These assumptions are not only part of the hidden agenda of the European Enlightenment, but are also being revealed by the current financial, social, and environmental crises.

¹⁷⁶ If we agree that the origin of the ecological crisis is a “modern” problem, then pre-modern insights seem to be appropriate to solve the problem. Both John Hart and Michael Northcott implicitly support this opinion while drawing from Native American, Franciscan, Amish, and Benedictine sources. According to Northcott and Hart, these different societies have managed to successfully articulate the personal, social, and environmental dimensions of the global common good. Yet how do we establish these complex connections in larger, industrial societies? How can we articulate personal goods, social goods, and the earth’s global good?

¹⁷⁷ Cf. Ibid., 168; Hollenbach, *Christian Ethics and the Common Good*, 9-16.

However, although humans are totally dependent on the earth system for their survival and hence the common good of the earth system has a certain priority over the good of individuals, we still need to reaffirm that human beings are not just one more species on earth. The pantheistic, monistic, and misanthropic tendencies seen in many green movements have to be counter-balanced with the unique character of the human expressed in the Christian *imago Dei* theme. It is not a coincidence that, as Herbert McCabe points out, we are the only “linguistic animals”¹⁷⁸ or the only ones with the power to preserve or bring the whole earth system to the brink of collapse. Only humans have the freedom, power, and responsibility to decide how to relate with the surrounding ecosystems in which they are embedded.

So far I have tried to argue that human communities *within* the earth system, not the *polis* or the nation-state, is the new framework of a revisited common good. This is an observation regarding the issue of proper scaling of our ecological concerns, and the proper locus of remedial action. The problem I have faced is that we do not have a single human community, but rather many different human societies within nation states. Furthermore, we do not have a clear idea of what it means to be part of the earth system. Can we, then, be responsible for the fate of the earth system? A reconstructed understanding of the common good will thus require new ways of imagining the social, economic, technological, and political dimensions of human societies within the unique earth system. The preservation of the common good will require more than fair personal relations, just economic transactions, and stable political institutions. It will require scientifically-informed and sustainable relations and practices. Let us move on and try to explore what those practices and relations may look like.

¹⁷⁸ McCabe, *Ethics and the Good Life: Ethics and the Pursuit of Happiness*, 98.

4.3. Responsible relations and practices

I suggested above that human communities are part of a wider whole or “earth system” upon which they rely and for whose preservation they are responsible. In the previous chapter, I argued that the modern illusion of individual isolation and independence is misguided and utterly false. The human-earth relation needs to take future generations and the single earth system into account. We should be concerned about the risk of nuclear power plants well before the occurrence of major nuclear crises like the ones witnessed in Chernobyl or Fukushima. We should be concerned about the diversity of life on earth before half of the world’s species disappear. We should be responsible for the well-being of future generations before they inherit a biologically impoverished, degraded, and polluted planet.

There is a growing awareness that technological fixes do not suffice to tackle the increasing environmental problems we are facing. We certainly need to promote technological research, but we also must explore more sustainable human-earth relations and practices.¹⁷⁹ Two elements need to be taken into account in order to think of any human relation and practice: time and space. We always occupy a particular place in a particular time; we never relate to anyone or anything on an empty stage. These two dimensions shape our being, our knowledge, and our imagination. We only relate to a limited number of people in a particular place and time. That is why we do not feel equally connected to every person or every non-human reality. We usually feel much closer to relatives and friends; friendship and family ties seem to have a stronger grip on our relations. We also feel strongly attached to particular places: our home, hometown, or country. The further away we move in time or space, the more difficult it becomes to feel related to these persons and places. The practices that flow from these relationships are also in accordance with the degree of closeness to the different realities with which we deal. Not anyone or anything matters the same.

¹⁷⁹ Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming*, 9.

At this point, Aristotle's reflection proves once again quite helpful. The Greek philosopher suggested that happiness is the highest good. Yet happiness cannot be achieved without other human beings. Happiness is something we discover, build, and sustain together in relationships. Friendship is the paradigmatic relation between humans. According to Aristotle, we not only need a group of friends for our well-being, but also must remain constantly open to cultivating friendly relations. However, Aristotle is aware that true friendship cannot be extended to everybody. True friendship is based on goodness and is rare "because men of this kind are few. And in addition they need time and intimacy."¹⁸⁰ However, in spite of this limitation, Aristotle argues that friendship can still be expanded to other persons, based on utility or pleasure.¹⁸¹ The question that remains is, could friendship be similarly extended to future generations and non-human beings? Can we speak of friendship to particular landscapes, plants, and animals? Will an expanded understanding of friendship parallel, as James Nash affirms, the "extension of love to the whole creation," and, if so, will it really make any difference?¹⁸²

Contemporary sciences do not speak of friendship or love to the natural world, yet they show that non-human beings are sort of an "extended family," a network of beings to which humans are genetically related and indebted. In our relation to God's creation, we need to constantly remember our dependence and indebtedness to God, previous generations, and the earth's ecosystems.¹⁸³ Charles Taylor, while discussing the principles of distributive justice from a social perspective, notes that "for

¹⁸⁰ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean ethics*, 1156b.

¹⁸¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 1156a.

¹⁸² Nash, *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*, 142.

¹⁸³ This is the religious root of thanksgiving. Blessing the food or saying grace before a meal is not only a liturgical, daily practice common across religions, but a way of expressing human indebtedness to God. In the Christian tradition it is paradigmatically expressed in the Eucharistic prayers. Saying thanks for the "fruits of the Earth" is a way of remembering human indebtedness toward the earth's ecosystems. John Paul II has spoken of a *double inheritance*: "the inheritance of what is given to the whole of humanity in the resources of nature, and the inheritance of what others have already developed on the basis of those resources." Cf. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, n. 13. In http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html. Accessed April 2011.

this common good of living in a family, or a community, or whatever, we are all in each other's debt."¹⁸⁴ Mutual indebtedness appears at the starting point of any human relation to the larger society and the natural world. We receive our genetic identity, nurture, and leisure from the earth system. We are, then, heavily indebted to it. In this sense, the human relation to the earth system is analogous to the relation to the family or the political community: it is the source and possibility of our very existence.

But Christians affirm that it is God, not the natural world, that is the ultimate giver of life, meaning, and being. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). We believe that we are ultimately indebted to God and, through Him, to God's creation. For Christians, the relationship with God is the one that grounds our being and our well-being. The relationship with God is mediated by and mirrored in the natural world. Yet this relationship is not obvious; it requires both a contemplative attitude and some form of "ecological literacy." It requires an attitude of wide-openness in our mind and spirit and senses.

The goal of spiritual life is to attain friendship with God. At the end of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola we find a prayer titled *Contemplation to Attain Love*.¹⁸⁵ In this prayer, God's love is channeled and given freely through the natural world. God appears as the "fountain" of all creatures. As I argued in chapter 2, the world extracts its sacramentality from God. Created beings are good because of their reference to God. Nature itself is not God; nature is neither enemy nor friend. It is merely God's creation.¹⁸⁶ As Michael Ivens argues, in the *Contemplation to Attain Love*, "as in the Foundation, the Creator/creature relationship is proposed with explicit reference to the things, events, and situations of

¹⁸⁴ Charles Taylor, "The Nature and Scope of Distributive justice," in Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the human sciences*, 298.

¹⁸⁵ Cf. Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises. Text and Commentary. A Handbook for Retreat Directors* (Leominster, England: Gracewing, 1998), [Ex 230-237].

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Stephen J. Pope, "Neither enemy nor friend: Nature as creation in the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas," *Zygon* 32 (2) (06) 1997: 219-230.

the exercitant's everyday world.”¹⁸⁷ Created things are the “natural” mediation between God's love and human beings in their everyday lives. The world becomes a sacramental space as far as it is related to God and human beings are capable of perceiving His love in it.¹⁸⁸

Being aware of the connection among all beings requires both a contemplative attitude and an educational effort: it requires “mirroring” nature and learning from its systemic dependencies, services, and interconnections. As Northcott contends, “recovering the proper human relation to creation involves mirroring this relationship of giving without mastery, of conferral of being without control.”¹⁸⁹ I have argued that this relationship of receiving and giving without mastery is the attitude and relationship displayed in the Eucharistic dynamic of gift exchange. Friendship, love, of the natural world foster an attitude of detachment, self-control, and respect toward God's creation. Friendship and love, and the sacramental vision orient the human-earth relation and inform daily human practices.

4.4. Binding together

Most of the human practices happen at the grassroots level. These practices shape the *ethos* of local human communities in their interactions with the earth's ecosystems. The sacramental vision of the natural world and the principles of friendship and love inform sustainable practices, take into account future generations, and care for non-human beings.¹⁹⁰ Some of these basic, daily human practices to

¹⁸⁷ Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises. Text and Commentary. A Handbook for Retreat Directors*, 169.

¹⁸⁸ Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 24: “All created things are a symbol of God's creative indwelling, they also proclaim just as clearly the even greater dissimilarity between themselves and the creator.” Love and friendship with all created things must face the challenges posed by a natural world in which predation, parasitism, and killing is necessary. True love and friendship with the natural world will not be possible. However, I argue that mutuality, cooperation, and symbiosis are, at least, as important as the above-mentioned natural dynamics.

¹⁸⁹ Northcott, *A moral climate: the ethics of global warming*, 79.

¹⁹⁰ The practices flowing from these principles will have to be adapted in different places and times. There are no “one-size-fits-all recommendations.” That is why previous definitions of the common good missed important elements and why any new definition will have to be constantly revisited. Proposals to forgive the debt of poor developing countries are a good example of how the guiding principles mentioned above can be translated into political decisions.

which we should pay attention are human dwelling, mobility, and eating. These practices connect us to other humans and to the earth's ecosystems; they are ways of building (or destroying) human communities and the common good. Patterns of human transportation, production, and consumption are pushing many ecosystems to the brink of collapse.¹⁹¹ As Northcott argues, the cultural obsession with speed, disordered eating habits, and profligate use of energy in many parts of the world are signs of a "moral perversion" with dire consequences for the common good of all.¹⁹² In short, daily, local human practices do matter; they either build up or destroy the common good.

Paying attention to such elements of our daily life is one of the most important ways to rebuild the common good and sustain the well-being of future generations and the stability of the earth's ecosystems. We will certainly need some form of global legislation to regulate, for instance, the emission of greenhouse gases. We will also need national and regional agreements on biodiversity protection, population control, industrial regulations, and agricultural subsidies.¹⁹³ International institutions will be required to address the crisis of the earth's common good. However, these institutions cannot replace the important decisions made at the local level.

Local human communities will be key in the search for a global common good for all. The immense power of consumer decisions and the bottom-up influence of grassroots movements on shaping the political and economic spheres should not be downplayed. The fair trade and Civil Rights movements in

¹⁹¹ For some authors, the current crisis is the moral equivalent of war, a war happening in our everyday lives. The enemies are not outsiders; they live within our own borders and look just like us. Jonas argued that although there is uncertainty on the causes and real effects of the ecological crisis, we must be led by the pragmatic rule to give the "prophecy of doom" priority over "the prophecy of bliss." For Jonas, the worst-case scenario is, like in the case of war or nuclear obliteration, the appropriate approach to the ecological crisis. Cf. Hans Jonas, *The imperative of responsibility: in search of an ethics for the technological age*.

¹⁹² Cf. Northcott, *A moral climate: the ethics of global warming*, 218.

¹⁹³ As Pope John XXIII argued almost half a century ago: "At the present time no political community is able to pursue its own interest and develop itself in isolation, because its prosperity and development are both a reflection and a component part of the prosperity and development of all the other political communities" (John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 131). The common good of the earth system is a good metaphor of the necessary global perspective needed to foster development, well-being, and peace for all.

the United States are just two examples of the ability of grassroots dynamics to expand and deepen the common good. They show that committed individuals and local communities through simple, daily practices can make a difference in the long run. Morally responsible persons and strong local communities can generate the binding energy necessary to preserve the common good.

Daily practices and habits of eating, moving, and dwelling, then, not only bind local human communities together, but also profoundly shape the earth-human relation. As Robert Putman contends, “binding” social practices sustain the social capital of a community or nation.¹⁹⁴ His compelling distinction between “bonding” and “bridging” social capital emerges as a promising insight at this point in my reflection. Binding practices create deep connections between both similar (bonding) and different (bridging) people within a society.

Building on Putman’s distinction, I argue that similar binding/bridging relations and practices need to be fostered between human communities and the earth’s ecosystems. We need to create stronger local communities and bridge the gap between cities, rural communities, and the natural world. We need to know where and how our food is grown. We need to learn how the energy we use is produced and what its effects are on the wider earth system. We must know the size of our “carbon footprint.” But we also need to do things together. We need to escape our artificial buildings, spend time in natural environments, study and learn how the earth’s ecosystems work. We need to know and experience how our actions and daily practices influence the natural world and the well-being of future generations. We need to learn how small decisions can make a big difference in preserving the common good for all. We cannot be responsible for the common good of the earth system unless we know its history and commit to its well-being. In other words, some form of social involvement and ecological literacy are required in

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

order to be responsible and bridge the gap between the modern ecologically illiterate citizen and the natural world.

Over the course of the centuries, individual citizens, nation-states, and whole regions have already gone through similar community-binding processes. After World War II, European nations realized a common project had to be fostered and built together. There was no other way out of centuries of myopic nationalism and confrontation. In more recent times, post-industrial economies, like the former Detroit automobile-based industry, are reinventing themselves in order to survive and preserve the good of the community. The binding energy and shared responsibility required to preserve the common good of the earth's ecosystems for future generations are sustained by meaningful practices and relations within strong, responsible, local communities. The global media and many international corporations shape political decisions, economic trends, and cultural influences. Nation-states have an important role to play as well. Yet local and regional communities shape habits and form moral character; stable moral communities provide a narrative and moral context for responsible relations and practices. According to Northcott, medieval "parochial" towns, Amish congregations, and Benedictine monasteries are paradigmatic communities where the common good has flourished.¹⁹⁵ In these types of communities, participation, material simplicity, equity, and accountability promote a shared responsibility for the common good.

However, even if there are practices we can learn from these paradigmatic communities, not all of us will become Amish congregants or Benedictine monks. In the future, we need to become ecologically literate and creatively implement the principles of love and friendship. We must live closer to nature, limit our unbridled consumption, and be responsible for the well-being of future generations and non-

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Northcott, *A moral climate: the ethics of global warming*, 150; 187; 263; Northcott, *The environment and Christian ethics*, 325-327.

human life. In order to build a sustainable civilization grounded in love, we need both a better perception of our limits and a renewed awareness of our indebtedness to God's creation.

Conclusions

This work did not aspire to provide detailed answers or policy recommendations for the many problems created by the so-called "ecological crisis." Only a few of the issues raised by this crisis have been discussed. This work had a relatively modest goal: to shed some light on these complex problems by drawing upon aspects of the Catholic tradition and, indirectly, propose some orientations that can help solve them. I conclude this work by summarizing some of the insights this research has offered. I will rely on a few brief, synthetic statements that may help recapitulate the argument of this thesis:

- In an age of widespread ecological breakdown, responsibility becomes a central Christian ethical concept and an appropriate term to express the complexity of the human-earth relation. The concept of responsibility is a multidimensional one; its meaning overlaps with many other philosophical and theological concepts such as vocation, fear, love, sin, knowledge, freedom, narrative, and community.
- From the circular relationship between Christian ethics and sacramental liturgy flows an ethics of responsibility toward creation. It is an ethics that requires a double dynamic of attachment to and detachment from creation. This type of dynamic is displayed in the Eucharist and can be stated as a dynamic of "wide-open senses" and "gift-return."
- An "ecologically-literate deacon" or "steward of creation" are good anthropological metaphors to foster responsibility toward creation.

- The dialogue between science and religion is providing a set of anthropological themes upon which these metaphors and a sound understanding of responsibility can be built. These include, to mention just a few, that human beings are intrinsic parts of the natural world, complex interrelated unities, radically limited and finite creatures, and responsible stewards of a natural world understood as a space of communion, interdependence, and creativity.
- This image of dependent persons-in-community matches traditional Christian insights, corrects misinterpretations of the *imago Dei* theme, fosters the idea of indebtedness to God's creation, and promotes a shared responsibility for the well-being of future generations and our global earth system. It indirectly provides ethical resources to tackle the current ecological problems while bridging the "narrative gap" between natural sciences, the humanities, and religion.
- This developing view of the human place in the cosmos as dependent persons-in-community parallels the emerging understanding of the earth's ecosystems as a global common good. The whole earth system is not only God's creation, but also the "primeval common good."
- An ecologically-reconstructed common good able to take into account future generations, and non-human beings is a rich and powerful symbol that orients human responsibility toward the natural world in an age of ecological breakdown.

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