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The Moral Significance of Creation in the Franciscan Theological Tradition: Implications for Contemporary Catholics and Public Policy

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ESSAY

THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
CREATION IN THE FRANCISCAN
THEOLOGICAL TRADITION:
IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY
CATHOLICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

KEITH DOUGLASS WARNER, O.F.M.*

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Pope John Paul II launched Catholic concern for the environment with his 1990 World Day of Peace Message, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*.¹ He articulated new ethical duties for Catholics, indeed for the whole human family, and in this article, I interpret these duties in light of the eight-hundred-year-old Franciscan theological tradition.

Pope John Paul II described the environmental crisis as rooted in a moral crisis for humanity, caused by our selfishness, our sin, and our lack of respect for life.² He proposed several ethical remedies. He said humanity should explore, examine and "safeguard" (alternative translation: steward) the integrity of creation.³ He described duties of human individuals and institutions of all kinds: the nations of the world should cooperate in the

* Santa Clara University. This essay was presented at the University of St. Thomas School of Law Symposium *Peace with Creation: Catholic Perspectives on Environmental Law*. Ilia Delio, O.S.F., Kenan Osborne, O.F.M., Bill Short, O.F.M., and Joseph Chinnici, O.F.M., contributed wisdom and insights on earlier versions of these ideas. Any shortcomings or mistakes, however, are mine.

1. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: A COMMON RESPONSIBILITY* (1990), reprinted in *AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD: CATHOLIC THEOLOGY AND THE ENVIRONMENT* 215 (Drew Christiansen & Walter Grazer eds., 1996).

2. *Id.* at 217-18.

3. *Id.* at 218.

management of the earth's goods, individual nations should care for their citizens, and individuals should undertake an education in ecological responsibility.⁴ These remedies should be undertaken out of responsibility to ourselves, others, and the earth.⁵ Five times in the Italian version of this message he referred to "the integrity of creation."⁶ This term is not commonly used in American environmental discourse. How might we understand its meaning? One clue is his reference to St. Francis, whom he described as "an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation."⁷

So great was the impact of *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility* that we can divide Catholic environmental concern into pre-1990 and post-1990 eras. Leading American Catholics had routinely denied that their faith carried with it environmental responsibilities during the two decades following Vatican II, but this position began to fade during the late 1980s.⁸ We can now speak of the greening of religion as a global, trans-religious phenomenon.⁹ Pope John Paul II's 1990 letter ended the debate as to whether Catholics should be concerned about the environment, thus the discussion within the Church moved to how we should care and how we should articulate a "distinctly Catholic" approach to environmental concerns.¹⁰ This term was repeatedly emphasized by the U.S. bishops and their representatives. By 1996, forty-eight statements were issued by bishops and regional bishops' conferences worldwide.¹¹ But what constitutes a "distinctly Catholic" approach to environmental concerns?

Pope Benedict XVI has continued to elaborate theological and ethical rationales for protecting the environment. He recently underscored the

4. *Id.* at 220–21.

5. Note that this echoes Pope Paul VI's vision of the duties for promoting peace in *Pacem in Terris*. See Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (Apr. 11, 1963), available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html.

6. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, at 216–222 ¶¶ 5, 7–8, 16. The Italian reads "*l'integrità del creato*." Four times this is translated to "integrity of creation" and, once, "whole of creation."

7. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, at 222.

8. Patrick Allitt, *American Catholics and the Environment, 1960–1995*, 84 CATHOLIC HIST. REV. 263 (1998).

9. See Keith Douglass Warner, O.F.M., *The Greening of American Catholicism: Identity, Conversion and Continuity*, 18 J. RELIGION & AM. CULTURE 113 (2008).

10. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1; see RENEWING THE EARTH: AN INVITATION TO REFLECTION AND ACTION ON ENVIRONMENT IN LIGHT OF CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING (Nat'l Conf. Catholic Bishops ed., 1992) (using the term "distinct" or "distinctly" three times in their groundbreaking pastoral letter on the environment); see also AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD, *supra* note 1; William Somplatsky-Jarman et al., *Partnership for the Environment Among U.S. Christians: Reports from the National Religious Partnership for the Environment*, in CHRISTIANITY AND ECOLOGY: SEEKING THE WELL-BEING OF EARTH AND HUMANS 579 (Dieter T. Hessel & Rosemary Radford Ruether eds., 2000).

11. AND GOD SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD, *supra* note 1, at 18 n.4. An updated collection and analysis of all the bishops' statements on the environment is much needed.

importance of listening to what he termed “the voice of the earth.”¹² In July 2007, he said:

[W]e all see that man can destroy the foundations of his existence, his earth, hence, that we can no longer simply do what we like or what seems useful and promising at the time with this earth of ours, with the reality entrusted to us . . . this is a first criterion to learn: that being itself, our earth, speaks to us and we must listen if we want to survive and to decipher this message of the earth.¹³

Creation, thus, has theological and moral significance, for it provides lessons for us to understand our existence and purpose here on earth. By moral significance I mean that creation lies—or should lie—within the domain of our ethical concern.

With this paper I consider these developments, what some might erroneously consider to be novel for the Catholic tradition, from a Franciscan theological perspective. Most reflection on environmental concerns within Christianity has focused on the environmental implications of stewardship and is rooted in Genesis and the Old Testament.¹⁴ A distinctively Catholic approach, however, would also draw from natural law and theological traditions. The Franciscan tradition celebrates St. Francis, to be sure, but theologians have for centuries elaborated the religious and moral implications of his genius. Francis’s moral imagination, grounded in theology by St. Bonaventure and Bl. John Duns Scotus, provides a refreshing perspective on the moral significance of creation, as recently expressed with the terms “integrity of creation” and “voice of the earth.”¹⁵ A Franciscan perspective offers a robust theological foundation for Catholic environmental ethics today. It can help flesh out the meaning of a “distinctly Catholic” approach to

12. Pope Benedict XVI, *On Conscience, Pastoral Organization and Immigrants: Papal Q-and-A Session with Priests from the Dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso, Italy* (Aug. 16, 2007), available at <http://zenit.org/article-20253?l=english>.

13. *Id.*

14. As environmental values began to take hold of American institutions in the 1970s, academics and church leaders began to wrestle with Christianity’s ambiguous stance toward the natural world. At first, many Christian leaders were suspicious of environmentalists due to the perception that the environmentalists espoused a critique of anthropocentrism and organized religion and reacted against the arguments of Lynn White. See Lynn Townsend White, Jr., *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, 155 *SCIENCE* 1203, 1203–07 (1967). For some early theological analysis, see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Take Care of the Earth* (1984). See also J. Baird Callicott, *Genesis and John Muir*, in *Covenant for a New Creation: Ethics, Religion and Social Policy* 107–40 (Carol S. Robb & Carl J. Casebolt eds., 1991). For some examples of the rising interest in creation’s theological significance among Old Testament scholars, see William P. Brown, *The Ethos of the Cosmos: The Genesis of Moral Imagination in the Bible* (1999); Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (1996); Walter Brueggemann, *The Loss and Recovery of Creation in Old Testament Theology*, 53 *THEOLOGY TODAY* 177, 177–90 (1996).

15. Pope John Paul II, *supra* note 1; Pope Benedict XVI, *supra* note 12.

environmental concerns by bringing Catholic values into dialogue with contemporary ethics, science and public policy.

This paper will proceed as follows. It begins by explaining why Francis was named “patron saint of those who promote ecology,” and describes the theological significance of creation for him. It then identifies key metaphors used by St. Bonaventure to describe creation in theological terms, and follows with an introduction to Bl. John Duns Scotus’s thought on the Christological significance of creation. It concludes by proposing some key implications from this tradition for our consideration today.

I. ST. FRANCIS, THE PATRON SAINT OF THOSE WHO PROMOTE ECOLOGY

In 1979, Pope John Paul II declared St. Francis to be “patron of those who promote ecology.”¹⁶ Considering the meaning of this expression provides insight into the Pope’s understanding of the saint’s contemporary relevance. In Europe during the 1970s, many people used the terms “ecology” and “environmental concern” interchangeably. In the United States, we now distinguish between ecology as a scientific discipline and environmentalism as valuing, and advocating for, the natural world. John Paul II also indirectly referred to Francis’s “Canticle of the Creatures,” one of the most beautiful hymns of creation in the Christian tradition.¹⁷ In it, Francis claimed as brother and sister all of the elements: Sir Brother Sun, Sister Moon and the Stars, Brother Air and All Weather, Sister Water, Brother Fire and “Our Sister Mother Earth.”¹⁸ Francis’s “Canticle of the Creatures” is his most notable text about nature; it reveals the contemplative experiences of God that he had in creation.¹⁹ The Canticle gave a great emphasis to Francis’s fraternal relationship with the elements, yet his hagiographers provided more emphasis on his relationship with animals.

Perhaps the most popular image of Francis’s care for creation is the story of Francis preaching to the birds. According to hagiographic literature, Francis had significant encounters with rabbits, fish, worms, bees, crickets and lambs. Half of his animal encounters were with birds, which he

16. Pope Paul II, *S. Franciscus Assisiensis caelestis Patronus oecologicae cultorum eligitur* [*St. Francis of Assisi Elected as Heavenly Patron of Those Who Promote Ecology*], 71 ACTA APOSTOLICA SEDIS 1509, 1509–10 (1979). Ironically, this declaration may have been in response to Lynn White’s call in White’s 1967 essay. See White, *supra* note 14.

17. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, at 222.

18. All texts of the writings by and about St. Francis are taken from 1 FRANCIS OF ASSISI: EARLY DOCUMENTS: THE SAINT (Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. et al. eds., 1999) [hereinafter EARLY DOCUMENTS]; see St. Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of the Creatures*, in EARLY DOCUMENTS, *supra*, at 113–14.

19. ILIA DELIO, O.S.F., A FRANCISCAN VIEW OF CREATION: LEARNING TO LIVE IN A SACRAMENTAL WORLD (2003); ILIA DELIO, O.S.F. ET AL., CARE FOR CREATION: A FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY OF THE EARTH (forthcoming 2008); Keith Douglass Warner, O.F.M., *Taking Nature Seriously: Nature Mysticism, Environmental Advocacy and the Franciscan Tradition*, in FRANCISCANS AND CREATION: WHAT IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY? (Elise Saggau, O.S.F., ed., 2003).

referred to as “noble among His creatures.”²⁰ Popular interpretations of these encounters have been overly sentimental, but recent scholarship has proposed the genuine significance of this human-animal encounter.²¹ Roger Sorrell in *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* offers a provocative re-interpretation of Francis preaching to the birds.²² Based on Thomas of Celano’s theological reflection at the end of the story, Sorrell asserted that the true significance of this encounter is the impact it had on Francis:

After the birds had listened so reverently to the word of God, he began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to them before. From that day on, he carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to love the Creator, because daily, *invoking the name of the Savior*, he observed their obedience in his own experience.²³

Sorrell argued that this experience served to integrate Francis’s views of nature with his understanding of himself as a preacher and resulted in a new outlook on creation.²⁴ The most important implication of the story is not that Francis preached to birds, but the impact the birds had on him. He awoke to the communion of life he shared with them. He had begun the sermon by addressing them as “brother birds,” but then afterward recognized that he had neglected to follow the implications of that fraternal relationship to their logical conclusion. He had a responsibility to preach to them.

In ethical terms, non-human creatures became theologically and morally significant. His experiences with creation inspired an expansion of Francis’s moral vision. Thomas A. Nairn, O.F.M., described the *Canticle* as an exercise of Francis’s moral imagination, meaning that Francis used his creativity to dream of how the elements could be related.²⁵ This can be extended to Francis’s relationship with animals, as well. Wild creatures had furthered his own process of conversion, much the same way his encounters with lepers had.

Francis’s vision of creation was not one of human stewardship (dutiful care for the other on behalf of someone else), but one of family members in a dynamic relationship. He did not view elements or animals as something for which he was responsible, but rather brothers and sisters whom he

20. Thomas of Celano, *The Life of St. Francis*, in EARLY DOCUMENTS, *supra* note 18, at 234.

21. The hagiographic literature is analyzed in greater detail in William J. Short, O.F.M., *Hagiographic Method in Reading Franciscan Sources: Stories of Francis and Creatures in Thomas of Celano’s First Life (58–61)*, in 4 GREYFRIARS REV. 63, 63 (1990); see generally Warner, *supra* note 19.

22. See generally ROGER D. SORRELL, *ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI AND NATURE* (1988). This is still the most definitive analysis of this subject.

23. St. Francis of Assisi, *supra* note 18, at 133–34.

24. SORRELL, *supra* note 22, at 9–33.

25. Thomas A. Nairn, O.F.M., *St. Francis of Assisi’s ‘Canticle of the Creatures’ as an Exercise of the Moral Imagination*, in FRANCISCAN THEOLOGY OF THE ENVIRONMENT 175–87 (Dawn M. Nothwehr, O.S.F. ed., 2002).

loved. Francis rejected power, ownership and authority for himself. He wanted to be humble and live in solidarity with creation just as Christ did through the Incarnation. His encounters with creatures provoked in him a greater consciousness of his brotherhood with all creation. Francis lived out of a horizontal, not a vertical, relationship with his human brothers and sisters, and he extended this way of relating to other creatures, as well. Francis understood creatures and elements to have intrinsic value because they are created by God and reflect God's love, not because of their usefulness to him or the human family. In the Franciscan tradition, creation has integrity and intrinsic value not because of its "worth," but because it is a reflection of God.

Francis was not a practical man, and if we mimicked his approach today, we would have neither agriculture nor natural resources nor modern society. His example reminds us, however, that our fundamental calling as human beings is to be creatures of God, living in relationship to Creator and creation according to the Gospel. From a Franciscan perspective, our first duty is to love God, and our love of creation emerges from this love. For too long, American society has over-emphasized the special privileges of humans. We modern humans disregard so many essential characteristics we share with the rest of creation: we are all creatures made and loved by God; we depend upon God and each other; we are corporeal with basic material needs of food, water, shelter and care.

As human beings, we have always depended upon creation, but now, because of human capacity for environmental destruction, creation's survival depends upon our care. We cannot live apart from creation, yet our collective behavior indicates we are unaware or unconcerned about its integrity. Francis's example reminds us of our core identity as members of, and co-participants in, creation. Francis was named patron saint of those who promote ecology—and advanced as an example of deep respect for the integrity of creation—because he embodied what Christopher Uhl described as ecological consciousness.²⁶ Creation inspired Francis's awareness of God, and prompted him to realize more fully his identity as a creature of God. Francis was aware not only of his dependence upon God the Creator, but also his dependence upon the integrity, and wholeness, of creation.

II. ST. BONAVENTURE AND CREATION'S THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Francis was not a formal theologian. He was a "vernacular theologian," meaning that he reflected theologically upon his experience, but he did not do so as a university-trained intellectual.²⁷ Fortunately, Francis was followed by those who systematically developed the theological and intel-

26. See generally CHRISTOPHER UHL, *DEVELOPING ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS* (2004).

27. See BERNARD MCGINN, *THE FLOWERING OF MYSTICISM* 19–24 (1998) (explaining the term "vernacular theologian").

lectual implications of his passion. In recent years, a major initiative has begun to retrieve this tradition and articulate it for our contemporary context. This section identifies key elements of St. Bonaventure's theological vision for understanding the moral significance of creation in our day.²⁸

Drawing from the experience of St. Francis, the Franciscan intellectual tradition is a philosophical and theological expression of the Catholic faith. It complements the other two major intellectual traditions within Western Catholicism: Augustinian and Thomistic (or Dominican). All three respect the fundamental teachings of Scripture, tradition and the magisterium. All three traditions have received the blessings of popes and scholars. They reinforce each other on the essential elements of the one Catholic faith, and, in their diverse interpretive approaches, they complement each other, like multiple strands woven together to make a stronger rope. The diversity of our Catholic theological traditions makes us stronger, able to preach the Gospel of hope in dynamic and ominous social contexts, and makes our one faith more robust.²⁹

The most important figure in this tradition is St. Bonaventure, the seraphic doctor.³⁰ He was a thirteenth-century Franciscan Friar who took Francis's intuition and formalized it into a philosophical and theological system. His theology has enjoyed a resurgence of interest, in part because it provides an alternative to Thomism with several advantages for fostering dialogue between religion and a modern scientific understanding of our evolutionary universe. Although his complex medieval thought patterns, replete with subtle symbolism and numbered images, can be intimidating for those unaccustomed to these kinds of texts, several very accessible summaries of his general thought and theological images of creation are now available. These theological metaphors build upon Francis's intuition, yet for us moderns, they break open fresh perspectives about what it means to be Catholic and the relationship between the Creator and creation.³¹

28. Joseph Chinnici, O.F.M., *Institutional Amnesia and the Challenge of Mobilizing Our Resources for Franciscan Theology*, in *THE FRANCISCAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION* 105 (Elise Saggau, O.S.F. ed., 2002); *ENGLISH SPEAKING CONFERENCE OF THE ORDER OF FRIARS MINOR, THE FRANCISCAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION PROJECT* (2001). Especially important is Chinnici, *supra* at 143 n.84, which lists recent monographs on Bonaventure and Scotus.

29. See Warner, *supra* note 19, at 73–74; see generally BRIAN CLEGG, *THE FIRST SCIENTIST: A LIFE OF ROGER BACON* (2003); KENAN B. OSBORNE, O.F.M., *THE FRANCISCAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION: TRACING ITS ORIGINS AND IDENTIFYING ITS CENTRAL COMPONENTS* (2003); *THE FRANCISCAN INTELLECTUAL TRADITION: WASHINGTON THEOLOGICAL UNION SYMPOSIUM PAPERS 2001* (Elise Saggau, O.S.F. ed., 2002). Note that this is not just a theological tradition, but an intellectual tradition. The early and contemporary friars are engaged in scholarship on issues beyond the typical disciplinary boundaries of theology. For example, Roger Bacon was a Franciscan Friar and a highly significant figure in laying the groundwork for the scientific revolution.

30. ILIA DELIO, O.S.F., *SIMPLY BONAVENTURE: AN INTRODUCTION TO HIS LIFE, THOUGHT AND WRITINGS* 16 (2001).

31. ZACHARY HAYES, O.F.M., *THE HIDDEN CENTER: SPIRITUALITY AND SPECULATIVE CHRISTOLOGY IN ST. BONAVENTURE* 2–6 (1981); see Naim, *supra* note 25, at pt. III.

Bonaventure uses the image of a circle to understand life: we come from God, we exist in relation to God, and we will return to God. The theological basis of this image is the Trinity, in which the Father is “fountain-fullness” (*fontalis plenitudo*) of goodness and communicates goodness through the Incarnate Son, who returns the love to the Father in the Spirit. Bonaventure’s understanding of the Trinity is critical to his theology in general and, specifically, his theology of creation. The Father is the source and goal of the emanation of the Trinity and of all created reality. For Bonaventure, a God who could create would communicate God’s self to others. The self-communicative goodness of the Father is God giving Godself away in the Word, which proceeds from the Father as the perfect expression and Image of God. As the full and total expression of God’s primal fruitfulness, the Son is the expression of all that God can be in relation to the finite. Thus, God is the Trinitarian community and invites us to share God’s life by entering into communion with Godself.

Bonaventure provides several metaphors to describe the universe and its relationship to the divine. In Bonaventure’s view, the Word is the inner self-expression of God, and the created order is the external expression of the inner Word. Creation cannot but flow out of the love between the Father and Son. Creation is thus an external Word of God, the “speech” of God, expressed in finite time and history. Bonaventure said that “the entire world is, as it were, a kind of book in which the Creator can be known in terms of power, wisdom and goodness which shine through in creatures.”³² Thus, the physical world has divine, communicative, religious and moral purpose. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., identified seven key metaphors of the material universe in Bonaventure’s thought:³³

1. *Circle:*

Bonaventure used the circle many times in his works as a symbol of the Trinity itself and for the movement of divine life into, through and back from creation. Salvation history is played out in a dynamic setting.

2. *Water:*

He used a fountain as a theological image for God’s love. The Father is the “fountain fullness”³⁴ from which the river of reality flows, both within the mystery of God’s self and outside the divinity in the form of creation. Bonaventure frequently described creation as a river that flows from that spring of God, spreading

32. ZACHARY HAYES, O.F.M., *BONAVENTURE: MYSTICAL WRITINGS* 64 (1999).

33. Adapted from Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., *The Cosmos, a Symbol of the Divine*, in FRANCIS CAN THEOLOGY OF THE ENVIRONMENT 249–66 (2003).

34. DELIO, *supra* note 30, at 13.

across the land to purify and fructify it, and flowing back to its origin. Water is essential to life, and exists in dynamic systems.

3. *Song:*

The Latin *carmen* can be translated as song or poem. Bonaventure drew from Augustine to compare the universe to a beautifully composed song, an image that Bonaventure borrowed from Augustine. Yet, he developed this metaphor further, insisting that full appreciation of a song requires grasping the entire melody—not only the individual notes, but also their inter-relation with pitch, rhythm and tone. His use of this image points to the necessity of understanding the individual components of creation as well as their integral whole.

4. *Book / Mirror:*

Bonaventure understood reality as two books, “one written within, namely the eternal Art and Wisdom of God; and the other written without, namely, the perceptible world.”³⁵ These books are like mirrors, for as one studies creation, one learns more about God, and as one comes to understand God, one recognizes God’s love in creation. Thus, the natural sciences can be of great help in understanding the person of God and the purpose of creation.

5. *Window:*

Light is a metaphor for divine reality and divine life. Bonaventure understood every creature (not only humans) to have within itself a shining forth of divine life, but mixed with darkness. The material cosmos is a window to the divine, and its rich diversity of creatures reflects the depth and richness of God.

6. *Micro- / Macrocosm:*

Bonaventure described the relationship between humanity and the cosmos by juxtaposing microcosm and macrocosm. They share the same constitutive elements of which Francis sang in the “Canticle of the Creatures.” Thus, in the Incarnation, Bonaventure recognized the beginning of the transfiguration of the cosmos.

7. *Cross:*

The seraphic doctor used this image to unite the whole of cosmic reality with the revelation of the Scriptures.

35. *Id.* at 255.

At the most fundamental level, our origin was God and our destiny is God. Our challenge is to live with an awareness of this awesome, superabundant love of God, expressed to us so vividly through creation.

In sum, Bonaventure's view was that creation is theophanic, meaning that it reveals something of God. Zachary Hayes, O.F.M., asserted that Bonaventure's theology provides significant advantages for Christians engaging in dialogue with contemporary science.³⁶ Bonaventure's theology of God and creation emphasizes systems of interdependence and the role of the senses in perceiving God's activity in the material world. Bonaventure's metaphors for creation illustrate some additional ways of understanding "the integrity of creation" because they emphasize systems and individuals, structure and aesthetics. Perhaps these images of creation illustrate how one of our theological traditions provides the basis for a distinctly Catholic approach to environmental concerns and for a constructive dialogue between religion and ecology.³⁷

III. JOHN DUNS SCOTUS: CREATION WAS CREATED FOR CHRIST

The Franciscan tradition is Christocentric and places a special emphasis on the Incarnation. John Duns Scotus was also a thirteenth-century Franciscan Friar whose writings reflect a deep, penetrating meditation on the significance of the Incarnation.³⁸ He fleshed out the philosophical, theological and ethical implications of Francis's intuitive understanding of the relationship between God's love, the Incarnation and the created world. He boldly asserted that God's love is the most important reality in the cosmos, and drew conclusions from this first principle.³⁹ His method was deeply faithful to the Christian tradition, yet highly original, and challenged shallow or distorted assumptions serving as obstacles to God's love and grace.⁴⁰

Scotus understood the Incarnation as the expression of God's love. The Son is the first in God's intention to love and thus to create. Creation is not an act of divine love that was incidentally, accidentally or independently followed by divine self-revelation in the Incarnation; rather, the divine desire to become incarnate was integral to the divine plan, and creation was made capable of bearing Christ in incarnate form. Scotus explained the Incarnation as a motive of God's love, not as a necessity of human sin. Jesus came to express God's love and not because of human sin. Thus, the Incarnation itself is an essential communicative strategy that reveals the charac-

36. *Id.* at 258–65.

37. Warner, *supra* note 19, at 58–59.

38. MARY BETH INGHAM, C.S.J., SCOTUS FOR DUNCES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBTLE DOCTOR 13, 22 (2003).

39. *Id.* at 32.

40. Translations of his original texts are difficult to read, but several more accessible, derivative works have been recently published, and these form the basis for this section. The most important is INGHAM, *supra* note 38. See also DELIO, A FRANCISCAN VIEW OF CREATION, *supra* note 19, at 33–40; Nairn, *supra* note 25, at pt. IV.

ter of God and love. It is not only a discrete historical event, nor merely a precondition for the Word to be preached to us. Christ is the meaning and model of creation and every creature is made in the Image of Christ. The divine logic of using the physical material world to communicate love to us was and is manifest in the Incarnation.

The idea that all of material creation was made for Christ means that, for Christ to come, there had to be a creation, and creation had to be capable of receiving, understanding and freely responding to this manner of divine initiative. The act and process of creation was a prelude to a much fuller manifestation of divine goodness, namely, the Incarnation. Creation was created for the Incarnation, and therefore every element, creature and person gives material, outward expression to the Word of God. When Jesus comes as the Incarnation of God, there is a "perfect fit" because everything has been made to resemble Jesus Christ. For Scotus, creation was not an independent act of divine love that was, incidentally, followed by divine self-revelation through the Incarnation; rather, the divine desire to become incarnate was intrinsic to the divine plan. The idea that all of creation is made for Christ means that, for Christ to come in material form, there had to be a creation and the creation of beings capable of understanding and freely responding to divine initiative. The richness of God's love provides a basis for explaining the richness and diversity of the created world. If the world is, in some way, an external expression of that mystery, and if no single created word can give adequate expression to the richness of that mystery, it is not surprising that there is a rich variety in creation through which the eternal mystery of love finds expression. Diversity is good and expresses God.

Scotus had a brilliant mind and brought fresh perspectives on eternal truths in the Catholic faith. If we agree with Scotus that the Incarnation was and is the strategy for communicating God's love, then creation must be capable of receiving the Word-Made-Flesh. It also suggests that creation must be theologically—and morally—significant because it was capable of receiving God Incarnate. Scotus did not understand creation as a flat, passive, meaningless empty stage for the divine message of love any more than Francis did. If we agree with Scotus that creation was created for Christ, then that suggests that its diversity—and integrity and protection—have great theological and moral meaning.

IV. CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY CATHOLICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

Hopefully this introduction to a few themes in the Franciscan theological tradition has provided some additional historical context for understanding recent teachings by our popes about a "distinctively Catholic" approach to environmental concerns. We have tremendous theological resources in

our Catholic tradition, yet sadly, most faithful are woefully ignorant of them. How should we appropriately draw conclusions from this theological tradition for our times? I would like to conclude by first revisiting the statements of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and then by proposing some specific implications for our vocations. First, a caveat: Sts. Francis and Bonaventure, and Bl. John Duns Scotus, were medieval men articulating theology during the Middle Ages, so we cannot simply adopt their viewpoints wholesale. We cannot and should not attempt to slavishly imitate their way of living or simplistically adopt their theological vision. I hope I have underscored that these ideas from the Franciscan tradition as well as the messages from contemporary popes bring the wisdom of our common Catholic tradition to bear on a set of urgent moral challenges facing the human family. I want to reiterate that the Franciscan theological tradition is a Catholic tradition. It is not merely for Franciscans. It is a gift for the Church, for the Christian family, indeed, for all persons of faith.

Pope John Paul II advanced St. Francis as “an example of genuine and deep respect for the integrity of creation.”⁴¹ Francis models for us a loving way of living in relationship to God the Creator and all creation, yet his example calls us to remember our fundamental identity as creatures, created by God and called to follow Jesus Christ. We are called to live in communion—in community—with other creatures. He perceived the diversity, patterning and dynamic life of creation as an expression of God’s goodness, and his response was love. He did not love creation as an idea or platonic ideal. Francis’s respect for the integrity of creation emerged from his experience of God’s goodness expressed in physicality, diversity and dynamism of the material world. Thus, these characteristics of creation were morally significant for him because it prompted him to fall more in love with God.

Can we detect the influence of Bonaventure on Pope Benedict XVI’s call to listen to the “voice of the earth”?⁴² Recall that when he was still Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI wrote his *habilitationsschrift*, his second dissertation qualifying him as a university lecturer, on St. Bonaventure.⁴³ I cannot claim that his 1950s study of the seraphic doctor influences his understanding of creation today, but I cannot ignore the striking consistency between the communicative purpose of Bonaventure’s metaphors for creation and Benedict’s image of “voice of the earth.” Creation has theological and moral purpose for us humans, and we are called to listen to its voice, to find our role within it. This calling, according to Benedict, makes demands on human society and special demands upon Catholics to learn the lessons from creation. I see this calling as fundamentally religious, but with scientific and public dimensions as well.

41. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, ¶ 16.

42. Pope Benedict XVI, *supra* note 12.

43. See generally JOSEPH RATZINGER, *THE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY IN ST. BONAVENTURE* (1971).

I propose three implications for us to consider: loving God with a greater awareness of the gift of creation; openness to the natural sciences, especially ecology; and an expanded understanding of the common good. By naming the poor man of Assisi patron saint of “those who promote ecology,” John Paul II connected Francis’s ancient insight with modern ecological science and concern for the environment. He oriented us toward the ecological awareness or consciousness of the saint and the possibility of dialogue with ecology as a science.

Francis lived as though creation were his family. The “integrity of creation” framework calls our attention to individual components *and* the dynamic relationships between them in systems. From this perspective, not only are individual “objects” within a system morally considerable, but also the quality and intensity of relationships between them. Our ethical vision shifts to recognize that all elements, all members of creation, have a role, have significance, and are worthy of our concern. This can be of great help in overcoming problematic dualisms so common in our contemporary world: the spirit is good/material world is evil; soul is good/body is evil; heaven is good/the earth is evil.

The Franciscan theological vision is amenable to dialogue with modern ecological sciences. Any Christian inclined toward a dialogue with the ecological sciences would find tremendous resources for that project in Franciscan theology. Ecology provides empirical evidence of the dynamic inter-relationships in creation of which Francis sang. Any inspired by a patron saint of those who promote ecology should likewise be inspired to become ecologically literate. After all, ecology is called a subversive science, for it reveals relationships that are not, *prima facie*, apparent.

This points back to the notions of awareness and consciousness. Ecology and contemplative prayer remind us that we depend upon the earth. Francis lived out of this awareness. Creating coherent public policy and effective regulation are essential for environmental protection, yet Francis calls us to live with integrity and awareness of creation’s goodness. From the perspective of both John Paul II and Franciscan theology, care for creation is not a “special” obligation for some people, nor could it be a partisan issue any more than human rights should be partisan. As the United States Catholic Bishops remind us, all members of society have a responsibility to learn about, teach, and act on behalf of safeguarding creation.⁴⁴ It is a common responsibility of all people and, especially, professionals and public officials, to whom society has accorded so much autonomy and responsibility. Bringing awareness of our interdependent relationships with creation to bear on professional prudential judgments is an essential component of respecting the integrity of creation in our times. Respecting the composition,

44. NAT’L CONF. CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *supra* note 10.

structure and functioning of ecosystems is a practical expression of Francis's respect for the integrity of creation.

If creation is morally significant, then we have some ethical duties to understand and care for its elements and creatures, which necessarily exist in (eco-)systems. This becomes a solid foundation for fostering constructive dialogue between Catholic moral theology, the science of ecology, and modern environmental ethics. Bonaventure's metaphors for creation could serve as an opening for this type of dialogue. If we have learned anything about environmental problems over the past fifty years, it is that they are complex and require multiple academic disciplinary perspectives to properly interpret and address them. Science, policy, ethics and (religious) values must be brought into dialogue. In 1990, a group of leading scientists called on religious communities to play a more active role in addressing our environmental problems, and the National Religious Partnership for the Environment was one result.⁴⁵

Bonaventure's metaphors anticipate a major contribution of modern environmental ethics: the articulation of holistic ethics. Drawn from the concept of the ecosystem, a holistic ethic extends our duties from merely individual organisms to "wholes" such as species, populations or ecosystems. "Holistic ethics holds that we have moral responsibilities to collections of (or relationships between) individuals rather than (or in addition to) responsibilities to those individuals who constitute the whole."⁴⁶ Ethical holism poses serious challenges to our conventional and constrained conceptualizations of morality. Thus far, holism in environmental ethics has been held out as an ideal with few applied expressions in human behavior or policy.

The global-scale collapse of biological diversity is one striking example of an environmental problem crying out for a more holistic approach.⁴⁷ Ecosystem ecology and conservation biology ecology have documented the fatal flaws of managing biological diversity on a species-by-species basis.⁴⁸ For example, an authentic reform of the Endangered Species Act would

45. An Open Letter to the Religious Community (Jan. 1990), in *ECOLOGY AND RELIGION: SCIENTISTS SPEAK*, at ii-vi (John E. Carroll & Keith Warner, O.F.M. eds., 1998); Somplatsky-Jarman et al., *supra* note 10, at 575.

46. JOSEPH R. DESJARDINS, *ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: AN INTRODUCTION TO ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY* 13 (4th ed. 2006); Nairn, *supra* note 25, at pt. IV.

47. Biological diversity, or biodiversity, is quite simply the diversity of life at the genetic, community and ecosystem scales. For background on the origins of the idea of biodiversity, see EDWARD O. WILSON, *THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE* (1992); EDWARD O. WILSON, *THE FUTURE OF LIFE* (2002); DAVID TAKACS, *THE IDEA OF BIODIVERSITY: PHILOSOPHIES OF PARADISE* (1996). For scientific evidence of the global biodiversity collapse, see I'NTL UNION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE, *2004 IUCN RED LIST OF THREATENED SPECIES: A GLOBAL SPECIES ASSESSMENT* (Jonathan E.M. Baillie et al. eds., 2004).

48. Gary K. Meffe & C. Ronald Carroll, *The Species in Conservation*, in *PRINCIPLES OF CONSERVATION BIOLOGY* 57-86 (2nd ed. 1997); JAMES GUSTAVE SPETH, *RED SKY AT MORNING: AMERICA AND THE CRISIS OF THE GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT* 25 (2004).

benefit from taking a more holistic ecosystem management approach.⁴⁹ A contemporary Franciscan response to the biodiversity crisis should include advocacy for endangered species conservation and for protecting the integrity of ecosystems that depend upon them. We have to do a better job of developing laws based on the reality of human society's interdependent relationship with the rest of creation.

The integrity of creation, viewed through a Franciscan lens, points toward expanding our Catholic concept of the common good. This is an essential concept in the Catholic social teaching tradition: the commons.⁵⁰ Many problems in our hyper-individualistic American society can be traced back to inadequate or superficial understandings of the common good. Every Catholic involved in the legal profession could make a major contribution by emphasizing this as a component of their vocational call.

American international environmental policy in recent decades has been characterized by American exceptionalism, tinged with arrogance.⁵¹ In his 1990 World Day of Peace message, John Paul II reiterated the critical importance of international cooperation and international diplomatic negotiations to address problems of the common good.⁵² In light of our Catholic tradition of the common good, the recent unilateralist approach of the American government, dismissing the value of international environmental treaties, is entirely indefensible.⁵³ Clearly our country should re-engage the international community by signing the Convention on Biological Diversity and some kind of agreement to combat global climate change.⁵⁴

Catholics should speak on behalf of the global commons and advocate that our government practice environmental leadership again. Is this not what Pope John Paul II suggested in his title, "A Common Responsibility"?⁵⁵ Acting on this broader, global perspective of the common good would go a long way toward living out a "distinctively Catholic" approach to environmental concerns. Would not advocacy for the global common good be a terrific witness to what it means to be Catholic today?

The Franciscan tradition points to an expansion of the common good from humans to all creation. We do not have the same duties to creation that we do to our immediate family, local communities or governments, but we do have duties to other creatures and the earth. Creation is highly significant

49. For a scientific and policy analysis, see 1 *THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT AT THIRTY: RENEWING THE CONSERVATION PROMISE* (Dale D. Goble, J. Michael Scott & Frank W. Davis eds., 2005).

50. A helpful reflection of this concept can be found in JOHN HART, *SACRAMENTAL COMMONS: CHRISTIAN ECOLOGICAL ETHICS* 61–77 (2006).

51. SPETH, *supra* note 48, at 4.

52. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, ¶ 9.

53. For analysis and an itemization of the international environmental treaties that the United States has not signed, see SPETH, *supra* note 48, at 77–115.

54. For a discussion of these treaties, see *id.* at 172–90, 203–28.

55. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1, ¶ 15.

in a theological and moral sense, and it is threatened by our human folly. Developing compelling moral arguments to persuade our species to act with greater restraint is urgent. By building on our Catholic principle of the common good, we can challenge shallow and short-sighted human behavior.

The "Little Flowers of St. Francis" relates the story of the wolf of Gubbio.⁵⁶ A wolf has taken to terrorizing citizens of the town, and they are deeply afraid. Francis sought out the ravenous wolf, preached penance to it, and brought it back to town. He invited the townsfolk to feed and care for the wolf and insisted that the wolf stop terrorizing the people. He preached reconciliation and repentance to both and achieved peace. Today, my brothers and sisters, we humans are the ravenous wolf, taking far beyond our needs and causing serious, and perhaps irreversible, harm to our brothers and sisters of other species. Today, the example of Francis invites us to take another path, that of "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation"—the subtitle of John Paul II's 1990 message.⁵⁷ May we make good choices so as to follow this path. St. Francis, pray for us!

56. SHORT ARMSTRONG ET AL., 3 FRANCIS OF ASSISI: EARLY DOCUMENTS 601-04 (2001).

57. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 1.