

The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology

By Benedict XVI (Maria Morciano, ed.)

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 218 pp., 2014

ISBN: 978-0-8132-2579-1

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Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a “human” ecology, which in turn demands a “social” ecology. All this means that humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology. (Pope Benedict XVI)

The degradation of nature is closely linked to the cultural models shaping human coexistence: consequently, when “human ecology” is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. (Pope Benedict XVI)

Is Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI a human ecologist?

In this collection of religious writings, sermons, talks, letters, and encyclicals collected and edited by Maria Morciano, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI lays out a vision of a sacred human ecology which aligns very well with many if not most of the tenets of academic human ecology. He has been called “The Green Pope,” and the writings in this book substantiate that moniker. The Catholic Church is well known for its stand and work for social justice, and it appears that social justice, equity, and environmental sustainability are woven together by Pope Benedict in this work. Of particular interest is Benedict’s (and John Paul II’s) use of the term “human ecology” to stand for the inclusion of humans and their communities, institutions, and civilizations when considering ecological, environmental, and sustainability issues.

The book is divided into three parts: “Creation and Nature;” “The Environment, Science, and Technology;” and “Hunger, Poverty, and the Earth’s Resources.” Each is a set of mostly edited excerpts from sermons, speeches, encyclicals, and essays created by Benedict during his tenure as Pope, which focus on environmental, ecological, and sustainability issues. There is an excellent forward by Jean-Louis Bruguès, which analyzes the work in the context of other Popes’ ecological writings, especially John Paul II.

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In Part 1, "Creation and Nature," Benedict points out that, "In contact with nature, individuals rediscover their proper dimension ... they perceive the mark of goodness and divine Providence in the world that surrounds them and open themselves almost spontaneously to praise and prayer" (p. 3), which is reminiscent of Rabbi Heschel's concept of radical awe (1965) and "Gaeologian," Thomas Berry's (2000) reminders that creation is the primary revelation of God. Benedict, in the chapter titled "Creation Is a Gift So That It Might Become the Garden of God and Hence a Garden for Men and Women," states that Christians who "believe in the Creator Spirit become aware of the fact that we cannot use and abuse the world and matter merely as material for our actions and desires; that we must consider creation a gift that has not been given to us to be destroyed, but to become God's garden, hence, a garden for men and women" (p. 4). This is a recurrent theme in the book, and has become an important teaching in more and more Christian denominations in recent years. Benedict claims that Christians encounter God in nature: "we have discovered an initial answer to the question as to what the Holy Spirit is, what he does, and how we can recognize him. He comes to meet us through creation and its beauty" (p. 5).

In a letter to Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, Benedict proclaims, "The joint effort to create awareness on the part of Christians of every denomination, in order to show 'the intrinsic connection between development, human need and the stewardship of creation,' is truly proving more important than ever" (p. 11), making a plea for ecumenical cooperation in fostering a healthy human ecology. "Alongside the ecology of nature, there exists what can be called a 'human' ecology, which in turn demands a 'social' ecology. ... humanity, if it truly desires peace, must be increasingly conscious of the links between natural ecology, or respect for nature, and human ecology" (p. 13). This understanding of the deeply interdependent web of existence—including individual humans and their communities, as well as all of nature—pervades the book.

Benedict connects protection of nature, development, and human dignity in ways that an academic human ecologist would recognize:

respect for nature is closely linked to the need to establish, between individuals and between nations, relationships that are attentive to the dignity of the person and capable of satisfying his or her authentic needs. The destruction of the environment, its improper or selfish use, and the violent hoarding of the earth's resources cause grievances, conflicts, and wars, precisely because they are the consequences of an inhumane concept of development. (p. 14)

For example, compare that statement with the ideas presented in Dyball and Newell's (2015) textbook, *Understanding Human Ecology*: "Ultimately, human ecology addresses what it would take to live well in a humane world. Whether approached via social pathways or environmental ones, eventually the same destination is reached" (Dyball & Newell, 2015, p. 205).

If we interpret "The Creator's Plan," as Benedict puts it, as representing the laws of physics and chemistry, and the principles of geology, biology, oceanography, and atmospheric dynamics, we can understand the power of his statement that, when "man turns his back on the Creator's plan, he provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the rest of the created order" requiring that "the entire human community—children and adults, industry sectors, states and international bodies—must take seriously the responsibility that falls to each and every one of us" (p. 20). Benedict writes that our use of the environment:

entails a personal responsibility toward humanity as a whole, and in particular toward the poor and toward future generations ... the Church is not only committed to promoting the protection of land, water, and air as gifts of the Creator destined to everyone but above all she invites others and works herself to protect mankind from self-destruction. In fact, when "human ecology" is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. (p. 33)

There has been much academic discussion by environmental scientists, environmental philosophers, and human ecologists about the role of the Christian doctrine of "stewardship" in causing or solving environmental issues. Some, such as Lynn White, Jr., in his seminal 1967 article in *Science*, claimed that the doctrine of stewardship may be one of the root causes of our environmental crisis, positing a "power over," ownership mentality regarding nature. However, Pope Benedict writes, "we cannot consider ourselves creation's absolute master. We are called, rather, to exercise responsible stewardship of creation, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits, and to cultivate it, finding the resources necessary for everyone to live with dignity" (p. 34). He advocates a responsible relationship with nature and each other, imploring that "The economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources must be recognized with transparency and *borne by those who incur them, and not by other peoples or future generations*" (p. 34, emphasis added). He emphatically states, "it is essential that the current model of global development be transformed through a greater, and shared, acceptance of responsibility for creation: this is demanded not only by environmental factors, but also by the scandal of hunger and human misery" (p. 35). Additionally, Benedict warns against "absolutizing" technology and human power, which would result in "a grave assault not only on nature, but also on human dignity itself" (p. 51). Despite giving humans a special

place which denies an ecocentric worldview, the Pope's (and most Christians') worldview of stewardship is powerful: *man must not abuse God's Creation, and is charged by God to care for it.*

Throughout the book, Benedict emphasizes that we need to substantially revise our current destructive industrial model of development:

Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes, and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions? Can we disregard the growing phenomenon of 'environmental refugees,' people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it—and often their possessions as well—in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources? All these are issues with a profound impact on the exercise of human rights, such as the right to life, food, health, and development ... Prudence would thus dictate a *profound, long-term review of our model of development.* (p. 41)

The above quote could have come from a human ecology textbook! Perhaps Pope Benedict *is* a human ecologist.

Benedict also calls for, in essence, whole-cost pricing, stating that "economic activity needs to consider the fact that every economic decision has a moral consequence and thus show increased respect for the environment. When making use of natural resources, we should be concerned for their protection and consider the cost entailed—environmentally and socially—as an essential part of the overall expenses incurred" (p. 44), not only to protect nature but also human beings and communities, and to eliminate "sacrifice zones" where people and nature are abused for the benefit of the few. Environmental and ecological economists and ecophilosophers have been promoting whole-cost pricing for decades as a way to use the power of the marketplace to help solve environmental and social problems, for example, *For the Common Good* (Daly & Cobb, 1994).

Benedict urges "A greater sense of intergenerational solidarity" (p. 44), reminiscent of the Native American concept of consideration for the seventh generation into the future (Lyons, 1994). "Future generations cannot be saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources" (p. 44). He shows an understanding of the limits imposed by the natural rates of resource replenishment and warns that using them faster would be stealing from future generations. "*The ecological crisis shows the urgency of a solidarity [intra-generational] which embraces time and space*" (p. 45). He points out that this crisis is a historical opportunity for the world community to retool efforts to create sustainable societies by a more

equitable distribution of resources, “more sober” lifestyles in the developed nations, and a “greater respect for creation.” Included in this plan is a great concern for local farming communities, their values, and the connection between climate change and poverty. “We can no longer do without a real change of outlook which will result in *new lifestyles*” (p. 48). The work needed to be accomplished to make this change a reality “should be ever more deeply anchored in respect for ‘human ecology’” (p. 49).

In the essay “Human Ecology Is an Imperative Need,” the Pope expresses his fear that “the human family risks disappearing” unless it “shifts its mentality” and reviews its entire approach to nature. Isn’t this one of the major goals of academic human ecology? “Nature is not a place solely for exploitation or for play. ... A human ecology is an imperative need. One of our political and economic priorities must be to adopt in every way a manner of life that respects the environment ... This is fundamental for us” (p. 73).

Benedict warns us against a blind belief in technological fixes to our problems and also warns us about the potential dangers of “progress.” He cautions us that “technology that dominates human beings deprives them of their humanity” (p. 74). Part 1 of the book, “Creation and Nature,” ends with an admonition that “there will be no good future for humanity on earth unless we teach everyone a lifestyle that is more responsible toward creation,” and furthermore, “Respect for the human being and respect for nature are one and the same” (p. 86).

Part 2 of the book, “The Environment, Science, and Technology,” further explores some of the themes presented in Part 1. Science is affirmed as a vital way of finding solutions to the difficult problems of sustainable development and environmental issues: “it is the duty of all peoples to implement policies to protect the environment in order to prevent the destruction of that natural capital whose fruits are necessary for the well-being of humanity. To meet this challenge, what is required is an interdisciplinary approach” (p. 97). He makes a strong case for the moral necessity of promoting social and environmental justice and adds, “In meeting the challenges of environmental protection and sustainable development, we are called to promote and safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’” (p. 98).

In a chapter titled “The Irresponsible Exploitation of the Environment Reflects an Inhumane Concept of Development,” he explains that such exploitation “or hoarding of land or marine resources ... affect[s] the poorest countries most” (p. 101). In subsequent chapters in Part 2, he further develops themes of the rights of the poor and future generations to “the fruits of earth,” and admonishes the developed nations to ensure that the less-developed societies are treated fairly, “Respecting the environment ... means not selfishly considering nature to be at the complete disposal of our own interests, for future generations

also have the right to reap its benefits and to exhibit toward nature the same responsible freedom that we claim for ourselves. Nor must we overlook the poor, who are excluded in many cases from the goods of creation" (p. 104). He is particularly concerned with energy issues, and warns "The problems looming on the horizon are complex and time is short" (p. 105). He makes an impassioned plea for cultural transformation: "Environmental degradation can only be slowed down by spreading an appropriate behavioral culture entailing more modest ways of living" (p. 110). He strongly supports a paradigm shift away from the "business as usual" model of growth. "We can no longer do without a real change of outlook which will result in new lifestyles. In fact we are all responsible for the protection and care of creation" (p. 117). He quotes St. Augustine, from *The City of God*, "Without justice—what else is the state but a great band of robbers" (p. 126).

Part 3 of the book, "Hunger, Poverty, and the Earth's Resources," continues to expand on the relationships between failure to consider the poor or the finite nature of natural resources by the industrial, developed world. He addresses international efforts to cooperate to foster sustainable development, and the need for a moral approach which combines environmental protection with a human ecology which considers the needs and rights of the poor to an equal share of Earth's resources.

In a chapter titled "Nourishing the World's Population with Respect for Biodiversity," Benedict points out that "famine is not entirely due to geographical and climatic situations or to the unfavorable circumstances linked to harvests. It is also caused by human beings themselves and by their selfishness, which is expressed by gaps in social organization, by rigidity in economic structures all too often oriented solely to profit" (p. 139); this is one of the consistent themes throughout the book. "In fact it is a question of adopting an inner attitude of responsibility, able to inspire a different lifestyle, with the necessary modest behavior and consumption, in order thereby to promote: the good of future generations in sustainable terms; the safeguard of the goods of creation; the distribution of resources" (p. 208).

He is aware of the limited, finite nature of natural resources, stating that "by their nature the goods of creation are limited: they therefore require responsible attitudes capable of encouraging the sought-after [food] security, thinking likewise of that of future generations" (p. 196). This is also an oft-repeated theme in the book—the obligation to consider the needs of the poor and of future generations.

Benedict also shows a consistent concern for the importance and protection of the rural family in agricultural development schemes; for example, "The *rural family* needs to regain its rightful place at the heart of the social order. The moral

principles and values which govern it belong to the heritage of humanity, and must take priority" (p. 143). He is also a strong proponent of the universal right to food, water, air, and work "for all human beings, without distinction or discrimination" (pp. 152, 179). The eradication of hunger is a moral imperative to him, and he asks the world community to "take into account the cycles and rhythm of nature known to the inhabitants of rural areas, thus protecting the traditional customs of the indigenous communities, leaving aside egotistical and exclusively economic motivations" (p. 152). He decries that "food itself has become an object of speculation or indeed is linked to the development of a financial market which, with no set rules and practically no moral principles, seems attached to the single goal of profit" (p. 202). To insure food security "means protecting natural resources from frenzied exploitation, since the consumer race and consequent waste appear to pay no attention at all" (p. 205).

He is concerned about the plight of climate change refugees: "climate change contributes to endangering the survival of millions of men, women, and children, forced to leave their country in search of food" (p. 157), and recognizes the complex relationship between poverty and globalization, stating that "when the demands of a true 'human ecology' are not respected, the cruel forces of poverty are unleashed" (p. 162). He warns that "immense military expenditure, involving material and human resources and arms, is in fact diverted from development projects for peoples, especially the poorest who are most in need of aid" (p. 165).

Benedict claims that the major reasons for the increased disparity between the global rich and poor are "on the one hand, advances in technology, which mainly benefit the more affluent, and on the other hand, changes in the prices of industrial products, which rise much faster than those of agricultural products and raw materials in the possession of poorer countries" (p. 166), which doubly impacts the poor. In the chapter "An Equitable Access to the Earth's Resources Should Be Guaranteed to Everyone," he expresses concern about the plight of agricultural workers dependent on international agricultural markets; "their labor is greedily exploited, and their produce is diverted to distant markets, with little or no resulting benefit for the local community itself ... A truly humane society will always know how to appreciate and reward appropriately the contribution made by the agricultural sector" (p. 176). He declares that local communities must always be involved in choices and decisions which affect the use of their lands.

He adamantly criticizes short-term, profit-only thinking, and outsourcing in the international business world, "*business management cannot concern itself only with the interests of the proprietors, but must also assume responsibility for all the other stakeholders who contribute to the life of the business: the workers, the clients, the suppliers of various elements of production, the community of reference*"

(p. 180, emphasis Benedict's). He would undoubtedly be a proponent of the "B" corporation, which requires corporate responsibility for *all* stakeholders. "What should be avoided is a speculative *use of financial resources* that yields to the temptation of seeking only short-term profit, without regard for the long-term sustainability" (p. 181). He calls for a "profound revision of the model of global economic development" (p. 198), and reminds us that his predecessor, John Paul II, taught that "*investment always has moral, as well as economic significance*" (p. 180, emphasis Benedict's).

So, is Pope Benedict, "The Green Pope," a human ecologist? Certainly so—although his interpretation is that of a sacred human ecology that puts humans squarely in charge of "God's Creation," as directed by God in giving humans stewardship responsibilities. His writings show a deep commitment to the principles of academic human ecology—tying together environmental protection, sustainable development, and social and environmental justice, all within an ethical framework grounded in Catholic and Christian doctrine and theology. I believe that the Catholic Church is and will continue to be an excellent ally in applied human ecology.

... respect human ecology, in the knowledge that natural ecology will likewise benefit, since the book of nature is one and indivisible. Prayer of Pope Benedict XVI (p. 61)

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This text is taken from *Human Ecology Review*,
Volume 21, Number 2, 2015, published 2015 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.