

# Catholic Social Tradition, the Environment, and the Option for the Poor

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## Environmental Ethics in Catholic Social Tradition

Catholic social tradition has a wealth of resources on environmental ethics and care for God’s creation. These teachings are rooted in scripture, but the Church has continued to respond to environmental issues over the years through encyclicals and other writings. The following themes drawn from the tradition are integral dimensions of ecological responsibility:

- *A God-centered and sacramental view of the universe*, which grounds human accountability for the fate of the earth;
- A consistent *respect for human life*, which extends to respect for all creation;
- A worldview affirming the ethical significance of *global interdependence and the common good*;
- *An ethic of solidarity* promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community;
- An understanding of *the universal purpose of created things*, which requires equitable use of the earth’s resources;
- *An option for the poor*, which gives passion to the quest for an equitable and sustainable world;
- A conception of *authentic development*, which offers a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth.<sup>1</sup>

God’s first act of revelation came through creation. This magnificent, diverse, and beautiful earth was God’s first creative act. Adam and Eve began in a garden of paradise. They were created and placed in this context where everything they needed to thrive was provided.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis writes, “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.”<sup>2</sup>

The Bible speaks again and again of the goodness and beauty of creation, which is called to glorify God.

**Genesis 1:4**—“God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good.”

**Psalms 19:1**—“The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.”

**Proverbs 3:19**—“The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens.”



**Romans 1:20**—“Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So they are without excuse.”

**Isaiah 65:17**—“For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.”

**Mark 16:15**—“And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.’”

These Scripture passages remind us that the earth is our context, our home, and the very substance of the web of life from which we all have a place in interdependent existence. Awe, wonder, and reverence for God’s Creation are appropriate responses. We glorify God by being present to the awesome beauty of the world and by respecting our common earthly home.

Poets remind us of this awe and reverence. John O’Donohue captures a sense of this sacramental view of creation in his poem “Axioms for Wildness:” challenging us to be “alive to the thrill of the wild,” he admonishes us to “feel the favor of earth.”<sup>3</sup> Mary Oliver, in her poem “Messenger,” declares her work “is loving the world,” just “standing still and learning to be astonished” by the intricate beauty of Creation. She reminds us to show our gratitude by rejoicing and sharing our joy.<sup>4</sup>

### Option for the Poor

The way we are present to and treat the earth has ethical implications and political, economic, and environmental consequences. How do we understand the option for the poor in light of environmental ethics?

“The option for the poor embedded in the Gospel and the Church’s teaching makes us aware that the poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis clearly draws the connection to the reason the ecological crisis of our time affects those living in poverty most directly and therefore demands particular care and concern for them. He is clear in his assertion that those with the least resources and options will suffer the most because of their plight.

As Pope Francis surveys the landscape of the current ecological crisis of our times, he takes note of the growing deserts in the world as well as in the human heart. He calls for both action, in change of habit, and conversion, in change of heart. In turning towards the poor, he states,

“There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”<sup>6</sup>

Within *Laudato Si’*, there is also a remarkable and compelling call to community, to see ourselves as one body—in Christ, yes, but in a temporal way, also: part of a larger interdependent community sharing



**“Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence.”**

—Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, #119

a common home where individualism is a threat to this way of being one. Pope Francis writes, “If we can overcome individualism, we will truly be able to develop a different lifestyle and bring about significant changes in society.”<sup>7</sup> He continues: “Social problems must be addressed by community networks and not simply by the sum of individual good deeds... The ecological conversion needed to bring about lasting change is also a community conversion.”<sup>8</sup> In solidarity, we are called to conversion so we may together transform the structures and systems that reflect a throw-away mentality, which includes dismissing people at the margins as well as ruining the environment.

Care for the environment begins with each person at home and in local communities. Efforts at reducing waste, recycling, and being responsible stewards is an important part of an environmental ethic. Awareness of the environmental issues right in our own backyards means things like drawing attention to the concentration of hazardous waste sites particularly in poor communities, the need to be vigilant about testing the lead levels in the local water supply, addressing zoning issues of dump sites located in close proximity to neighborhoods and schools. Care for the earth does indeed begin at home.

#### **Timeline of the More Formal Development of the Church’s Teaching on the Environment**

<b>1990</b>	Pope John Paul II writes <i>World Day of Peace Message: Peace With God The Creator, Peace With All Of Creation</i>
<b>1992</b>	Holy See participates in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
<b>1994</b>	New Edition of the <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> includes ecological themes for the first time
<b>2002</b>	Pope John Paul II signs historic Venice Declaration on climate change
<b>2009</b>	Pope Benedict XVI writes <i>Caritas in Veritate</i>
<b>2010</b>	Pope Benedict XVI writes <i>World Day of Peace Message: If you Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation</i>
<b>2013</b>	Pope Francis writes <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>
<b>2016</b>	Pope Francis writes <i>Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home</i>



## Signs of the Times

Concern for the environment and humanity’s relationship with it has found its way into many papal documents in the form of brief mentions. However, as the “signs of the times” have been demonstrating some of the negative and destructive nature of that relationship, the documents below are those whose primary focus and content is this very relationship.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and Papal documents directly address care of creation as a moral and ethical imperative. The following chart provides a summary and key quotes from each document.

Year	Document
1990	<p><b><u><a href="#">Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace Message: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation</a></u></b></p> <p><i>This is the first time a pope explicitly links the plight of the poor and the degradation of the environment as a moral problem. It calls for a new solidarity between and among nations to address environmental issues. Efforts at alleviating poverty will reduce ecological problems. This document also connects the effects of war upon environmental degradation.</i></p> <p>“The ecological crisis reveals the urgent moral need for a new solidarity, especially in relations between the developing nations and those that are highly industrialized. States must increasingly share responsibility, in complimentary ways, for the promotion of a natural and social environment that is both peaceful and healthy” (#10).</p> <p>“It must also be said that the proper ecological balance will not be found without directly addressing the structural forms of poverty that exist throughout the world” (#11).</p> <p>“Today, any form of war on a global scale would lead to incalculable ecological damage. But even local or regional wars, however limited, not only destroy human life and social structures, but also damage the land, ruining crops and vegetation as well as poisoning the soil and water. The survivors of war are forced to begin a new life in very difficult environmental conditions, which in turn create situations of extreme social unrest, with further negative consequences for the environment” (#12).</p> <p>“The commitment of believers to a healthy environment for everyone stems directly from their belief in God the Creator, from their recognition of the effects of original and personal sin, and from the certainty of having been redeemed by Christ. Respect for life and for the dignity of the human person extends also to the rest of creation, which is called to join man in praising God” (#16).</p>



1991	<p><b><u>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <i>Renewing the Earth</i></u></b></p> <p><i>This document signals the USCCB’s landmark statement on environmental issues. The bishops address the moral implications of climate change in a public document and include a call to action. This document links the questions of ecology, poverty, and development together.</i></p> <p>“The whole human race suffers as a result of environmental blight, and generations yet unborn will bear the cost for our failure to act today. But in most countries today, including our own, it is the poor and the powerless who most directly bear the burden of current environmental carelessness. Their lands and neighborhoods are more likely to be polluted or to host toxic waste dumps, their water to be undrinkable, their children to be harmed. Too often, the structure of sacrifice involved in environmental remedies seems to exact a high price from the poor and from workers.”</p> <p>“The option for the poor embedded in the Gospel and the Church’s teaching makes us aware that the poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering.”</p>
2001	<p><b><u>United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <i>Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good</i></u></b></p> <p><i>This document begins to engage the science and data surrounding climate change. The bishops draw on the emerging science as well as the virtue of prudence in addressing climate change. It outlines the role that the Church is called to play in environmental debates as one of providing moral perspective in the dialogue.</i></p> <p>“Working for the common good requires us to promote the flourishing of all human life and all of God’s creation. In a special way, the common good requires solidarity with the poor who are often without the resources to face many problems, including the potential impacts of climate change. Our obligations to the one human family stretch across space and time. They tie us to the poor in our midst and across the globe, as well as to future generations. The commandment to love our neighbor invites us to consider the poor and marginalized of other nations as true brothers and sisters who share with us the one table of life intended by God for the enjoyment of all.”</p>
2009	<p><b><u>Pope Benedict XVI, <i>Caritas in Veritate</i></u></b></p> <p><i>Pope Benedict frames the environmental crisis in the context of integral development. Intergenerational justice and responsibility are part of a renewed call for solidarity in finding balance for the needs of human beings in their use of the earth’s resources. The phrase “the grammar of nature” appears for the first time.</i></p> <p>“The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights, beginning with the fundamental right to life. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination. It is important, moreover, to emphasize that solidarity with poor countries in the process of development can point towards a solution of the current global crisis, as politicians and directors of international institutions have begun to sense in recent times” (#27).</p> <p>“Today the subject of development is also closely related to the duties arising from our relationship to the natural environment. The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God’s creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation” (#48).</p>



2010	<p><b><u>Pope Benedict XVI, <i>World Day of Peace Message: If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation</i></u></b></p> <p>“Respect for creation is of immense consequence, not least because “creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God’s works,” and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind. Man’s inhumanity to man has given rise to numerous threats to peace and to authentic and integral human development—wars, international and regional conflicts, acts of terrorism, and violations of human rights. Yet no less troubling are the threats arising from the neglect—if not downright misuse—of the earth and the natural goods that God has given us. For this reason, it is imperative that mankind renew and strengthen “that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying.”</p>
2013	<p><b><u>Pope Francis, <i>Evangelii Gaudium</i></u></b></p> <p><i>Pope Francis recognizes that the environment is part of the exploitation of the market and needs care and protection.</i></p> <p>“Sometimes it is a matter of hearing the cry of entire peoples, the poorest peoples of the earth, since ‘peace is founded not only on respect for human rights, but also on respect for the rights of peoples.’ Sadly, even human rights can be used as a justification for an inordinate defense of individual rights or the rights of the richer peoples. With due respect for the autonomy and culture of every nation, we must never forget that the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resources or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity” (#190).</p> <p>“For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. God shows the poor ‘his first mercy.’ This divine preference has consequences for the faith life of all Christians, since we are called to have ‘this mind... which was in Jesus Christ’ (Phil 2:5). Inspired by this, the Church has made an option for the poor which is understood as a ‘special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness.’ This option – as Benedict XVI has taught – ‘is implicit in our Christian faith in a God who became poor for us, so as to enrich us with his poverty’” (#198).</p> <p>“There are other weak and defenseless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests or indiscriminate exploitation. I am speaking of creation as a whole. We human beings are not only the beneficiaries but also the stewards of other creatures. Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement. Let us not leave in our wake a swath of destruction and death which will affect our own lives and those of future generations” (#215).</p>

2015

**Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home***

*Laudato Si'* represents a new development in the social teaching of the Church with its focus on the gift of the created order. It draws especially on the writings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI to indicate continuity with past teachings. The ecological crisis of our times has spiritual dimensions.

“The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.’ For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion. It must be said that some committed and prayerful Christians, with the excuse of realism and pragmatism, tend to ridicule expressions of concern for the environment. Others are passive; they choose not to change their habits and thus become inconsistent. So what they all need is an ‘ecological conversion,’ whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (#217).

“Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also ‘macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones.’ That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a ‘civilization of love.’ Social love is the key to authentic development: ‘In order to make society more human, more worthy of the human person, love in social life—political, economic and cultural—must be given renewed value, becoming the constant and highest norm for all activity.’ In this framework, along with the importance of little everyday gestures, social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society. When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realize that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us” (#231).

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, Washington, D.C. 1991, <http://bit.ly/2pqUPgj>.
- <sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. May 24, 2015, #233, <http://bit.ly/2pm11Wy>.
- <sup>3</sup> O'Donohue, John. *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. Doubleday: New York. 2008, p. 153-154.
- <sup>4</sup> Oliver, Mary. *Thirst*. Beacon Press: Boston. 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, Washington, D.C. 1991, <http://bit.ly/2pqUPgj>.
- <sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. May 24, 2015, #25, <http://bit.ly/2pm11Wy>.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, #208.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, #219.

**Other References**

Christiansen, Drew, and Walter Grazer. *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*. United States Catholic Conference: Washington, D.C. 1996.



### Discussion Questions

- How are we called to care for God’s creation? How may we apply our social teaching, with its emphasis on the life and dignity of the human person, to the challenge of protecting the earth, our common home?
- What can we in the Catholic community offer to the environmental movement, and what can we learn from it?
- How can we encourage a serious dialogue in the Catholic community—in our parishes, schools, colleges, universities, and other settings—on the significant ethical dimensions of the environmental crisis?
- How can we recognize and confront the possible conflicts between environment and jobs, and work for the common good and solutions that value both people and the earth?

### Act

- Become a BreatheLife Community: <http://bit.ly/2FI4Bol>.
- Take the St. Francis Pledge to help care for our common home and our vulnerable sisters and brothers: <http://bit.ly/2FKdb67>.
- Read the article “Eight Ways That Climate Change Hurts Humans” and discuss these realities in a small group: <http://bit.ly/2FJPevy>.

### Prayer

God of all Creation, move us to be present  
To the intricate and complex beauty of your Creation.

Inspire us to rejoice in this great gift,  
A gift of a common home we share with all your children.

Lead us to reflection and to action  
So the entire human family may flourish as you have created us—  
To live and thrive, to grow in grace and goodness  
In the garden watered and restored.

Hear our prayers and bless us for the work ahead. Amen.

—Jane Deren, Ph.D.

