

# MELITA THEOLOGICA

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## **Environmental Ethics**

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Martin Micallef and Raymond Zammit



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## Editorial Note

I am honoured to introduce this monographic edition of *Melita Theologica* on environmental ethics. The choice of this theme is not fortuitous since the Chief Editor's request to the Department of Moral Theology to embark on this thematic issue coincided with the universal Church's celebration of the fifth anniversary of *Laudato si'* (24 May 2020 - 24 May 2021), which is considered a landmark encyclical in the *corpus* of Christian social teaching. Six years on, *Laudato si'* continues to challenge us all, particularly at a time when the global environmental (and social) crisis is increasingly emerging as one of the *res novae* of our time.

This crisis has been long in the making, as the extremely influential paper by Lynn White made clear.<sup>1</sup> The American historian, who pioneered the field of medieval technology, maintained that the root of the environmental crisis lies in the "exploitative" attitude towards nature which developed alongside the technological developments since the Middle Ages in the Christian West. White asserted that "we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man."<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively, he proposed that:

Possibly we should ponder the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ: Saint Francis of Assisi ... The key to an understanding of Francis is his belief in the virtue of humility – not merely for the individual but for man as a species. Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God's creatures. With him the ant is no longer simply a homily for the lazy,

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Townsend White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (10 March 1967): 1203-1207. See also Lynn Townsend White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); Lynn Townsend White, *Medieval Religion and Technology: Collected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

flames a sign of the thrust of the soul toward union with God; now they are Brother Ant and Sister Fire, praising the Creator in their own ways as Brother Man does in his ...

The greatest spiritual revolutionary in Western history, Saint Francis, proposed what he thought was an alternative Christian view of nature and man's relation to it; he tried to substitute the idea of the equality of all creatures, including man, for the idea of man's limitless rule of creation. He failed. Both our present science and our present technology are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecologic crisis can be expected from them alone. Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. The profoundly religious, but heretical, sense of the primitive Franciscans for the spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature may point a direction. I propose Francis as a patron saint for ecologists.<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere does Pope Francis quote White in *Laudato si'*, though the Argentinian pontiff does not shy away from quoting other secular authors. Nonetheless, *Laudato si'* shares many of White's concerns, namely the technocratic paradigm and an excessive anthropocentrism which negates any intrinsic value of the created world, as well as, of course, the common reference to Francis of Assisi.

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Roger Aubert, the Belgian Catholic priest, theologian and ecclesiastical historian, held that:

From 1848, the year in which Marx published the *Communist Manifesto*, to 1891, the year of *Rerum novarum*, more than half a century went by [*sic*]. These two dates have often been contrasted to point out how late the Church, by comparison with the Socialist movement, came to recognize the workers [*sic*] problem. In reality, however, the situation is more complex than this ...<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the same can be said with respect to the historical time difference between White's paper and *Laudato si'*. While the need for an encyclical on the environment had long been felt, environmental concerns have not been absent

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Aubert, "On the Origins of Catholic Social Doctrine 1966," in *Catholic Social Teaching: An Historical Perspective*, ed. David A. Boileau (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2003), 75. Originally, Roger Aubert, "Aux origines de la doctrine sociale catholique," *Dossiers de l'action sociale catholique* 43 (1966): 249-278.

in papal teaching.<sup>5</sup> Already in 1971, Paul VI listed the environment as one of 11 “New Social Problems,” writing that:

While the horizon of man is thus being modified according to the images that are chosen for him, another transformation is making itself felt, one which is the dramatic and unexpected consequence of human activity. Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation. Not only is the material environment becoming a permanent menace – pollution and refuse, new illness and absolute destructive capacity – but the human framework is no longer under man’s control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family.

The Christian must turn to these new perceptions in order to take on responsibility, together with the rest of men, for a destiny which from now on is shared by all.<sup>6</sup>

Less than a year after his election as a Pope in October 1978, John Paul II promulgated the encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, which explored how contemporary problems could find a resolution in a deeper understanding of the human person. In this encyclical, the Polish Pope highlighted how human beings come under threat from the very things they produce, through the work of their hands and their intellect, due to the tendencies of their will. Lamenting that human beings often do not see meaning in the natural environment beyond what serves for their use and consumption, the Pope underlined that the Creator willed “that man should communicate with nature as an intelligent and noble ‘master’ and ‘guardian,’ and not as a heedless ‘exploiter’ and ‘destroyer’” (*RH*, 15). Moreover, he argued, that “the essential meaning of this “kingship” and “dominion” of man over the visible world ... consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter” (*RH*, 16). A few months later, on 29 November 1979, John Paul II proclaimed Francis of Assisi patron saint of ecologists.<sup>7</sup> Addressing the UN General Assembly on 18 August 1985, John Paul II made it clear that “the Church’s commitment to the conservation and improvement of our environment is linked to a command of God” and his 1990 World Day of Peace statement,

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<sup>5</sup> Marjorie Keenan, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment 1972-2002* (Rome: Vatican Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens*, 1971, 21. See also Paul VI, *Message to the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations* (1 June 1972).

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Inter Sanctos* (1979).

entitled “Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation,” made it clear that the ecological crisis is a moral problem. While these statements do not exhaust John Paul II’s contribution on environmental issues, the moral nature of the problem at hand is clear.

Benedict XVI was similarly concerned with the environmental crisis. In his inaugural homily as Bishop of Rome, he pointed out that “[t]he external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” As a result, “the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.”<sup>8</sup> A few years later, addressing the UN General Assembly on 19 April 2008, the German pope pleaded that:

International action to preserve the environment and to protect various forms of life on earth must not only guarantee a rational use of technology and science, but must also rediscover the authentic image of creation. This never requires a choice to be made between science and ethics: rather it is a question of adopting a scientific method that is truly respectful of ethical imperatives.<sup>9</sup>

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It is appropriate that the first article of this issue of *Melita Theologica* dedicated to environmental ethics focuses on the local Church’s concern and commitment to the safeguarding of the environment. The content of this article, which I penned with my colleague Rev. Dr Carlo Calleja, addresses the widespread misconception that the Church in Malta is indifferent to the commodification of the environment. Our study reveals that the local Church, through its hierarchy and its Environmental Commission, has rallied to civil society against public policies and decisions which threatened to ravage the natural and built environment. It has also not shied away from presenting proposals on how the Church itself can re-evaluate its role as Mother and Teacher, as well as Sister and Servant, in light of the encyclical *Laudato si’*.

The second article, entitled “Our Common Home Belongs to All Generations,” highlights how the social teaching of the Church has evolved over the last few decades from global to intergenerational responsibility and solidarity. Written by Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Agius, who is internationally renowned, among other things, for his pioneer academic work on future generations, the article

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, *Homily during the Mass for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry*, Rome, 24 April 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations*, 2008, 2.

acknowledges the interrelatedness of the ecosystem and therefore the long-term adverse consequences of the globalisation of the technocratic paradigm on posterity. Agius thus argues that Pope Francis' "broader vision" (*LS*, 159) implied in the concept of "integral ecology" redefines the traditional pillars of Catholic social ethics, namely, the concepts of "common good," "justice" and "solidarity" (*LS*, 159-162), demonstrating once again that "the whole is greater than the part" (*LS*, 141).

In line with the Editorial Board's policy to publish peer-reviewed articles in Italian, Spanish and German (as long as the majority of the articles remain in English), the third article, written in Italian, deals with the concept of integral eco-theology. In this article, Prof. Pasquale Giustiniani argues that "integral ecology" calls for an interdisciplinary view which combines not only an urban ecology but also an ecology of relations. Thus, after outlining the theological debate on the matter in the past 30 years, the Italian professor then focuses his attention on the magisterium of the present Pontificate before highlighting some didactic and academic implications.

Claudette Baluci and Rev. Dr John Berry then take up the Christological ecology of Joseph Ratzinger who established himself as an untiring champion of the environment during his papacy. They insist that concern for creation should not be reduced to mere ecological activism, and that it is wrong to believe that environmental protection is not related to a living Christian faith. Indeed, an integral human ecology, with harmony with nature and amongst people is only possible through an orientation towards Christ and the practice of Christian love.

The following article, written by Rev. Dr Eduardo Agosta Scarel O.Carm., focuses on climate change. A climatologist and an ordained Catholic priest, the author argues that the global environmental and social crisis ought to be scrutinised as a sign of the times. The spatiality of the crisis, however, opens a discussion also on the signs of the place. The global *oikos*, or common home, is therefore a theological place which ought to lead to ecological conversion through an integral ecology and ecological spirituality.

The theme of ecological spirituality is discussed in the article of Rev. Dr Glen Attard O.Carm., and Rev. Dr Charlò Camilleri O.Carm., who offer interesting insights on the medieval ecological contemplation discussed by the Carmelite John of Hildesheim (c. 1310-1375) in his book *Speculum fontis vitae*. Taking the anthropocentric and biocentric approaches to human interaction with nature as a starting point, this article reads the *Speculum fontis vitae* from an ecological perspective. In analysing this interesting text, this contribution seeks to find new

avenues of contextualisation for Carmelite spirituality, bringing a fourteenth century text into the twenty-first century to propose a contemplative path in ecological discourse.

Interestingly, at the planning stage of this monograph, Rev. Dr Paul Sciberras, then Head of Department of Scripture and now Deputy Dean of the Faculty, brought to my attention an oration which the late Rev. Prof. Emeritus Carmelo Sant delivered at the graduation ceremony held at Tal-Virtù, Rabat, on Saturday 20 December 1986. Addressing the students who were graduating in theology – among whom Charles J. Scicluna (SThL), Nicholas Cachia and Paul Sciberras (SThB)<sup>10</sup> – the esteemed Maltese biblical scholar noted that “ecology, or the threat to the natural and cultural environment, has become a living issue all the world over” due to “what is improperly called development.” He optimistically expressed his wish that his speech would “serve to raise the moral conscience of us all with respect to this problem, which should be urgently solved with the least possible delay, unless we want to find ourselves living in a wasteland, barren rocks or in lifeless match-boxes raised to the skies.” One may wonder what effect this oration had on H.G. Mgr Charles J. Scicluna, Archbishop of Malta, who does not mince his words in favour of the environment. As deemed fit, this oration is being published for the first time in this issue.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Rev. Dr Martin Micallef, the Chief Editor of this peer-reviewed journal, for entrusting this special issue to our Department of Moral Theology. I thank all authors who have contributed to this issue for sharing their research to raise the readers’ consciousness about today’s environmental crisis which is becoming ever more pressing. Our department is committed to bring the environmental concern more and more to the foreground of its research and teaching not only at an undergraduate level, by offering study-units on Catholic Social Teaching, business ethics, and food ethics, but more so by launching postgraduate programmes of studies in bioethics (since 2008) and business ethics (since 2013). It is envisaged that a Master of Arts in Environmental Ethics will soon be launched in cooperation with other academic entities engaged in environmental research and teaching. Promoting an awareness about the ecological crisis and spurring for changes in lifestyle and mind-sets,

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<sup>10</sup> H.G. Mgr Charles J. Scicluna is the current Archbishop of Malta; Rev. Dr Nicholas Cachia, who lectured in spiritual theology both within the Department of Moral Theology at our Faculty, and in the USA, passed away recently; Rev. Dr Paul Sciberras is currently Deputy Dean of our Faculty. I am grateful to Dr Sciberras for having graciously kept a copy of this speech and for bringing it to my attention.



or conversion, together with the promotion of an ecological spirituality are the continuous challenge of every educational institution which is concerned with the right to a healthy environment of both present and future generations!

Rev. Dr Raymond Zammit  
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