



## ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN PAPAL ENCYCLICALS (1981-2020)

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to throw light and understand the environmental ethics mentioned in Papal Encyclicals by the different Catholic Popes according to the sign of the times between 1981 and 2020. They provide precious insights to solve many environmental problems to build up the foundations of environmental ethics. Through the encyclicals, the Popes have touched the hearts of people of various times with eco-concepts. This article exhibits the continuous and creative efforts of the Catholic Church in teaching environmental ethics to every human being who tries to exploit God's creation due to one's extravagant needs and greed. Thus, the Church plays a massive role to create awareness among the people of all times to respect and cherish a 'Green world'.

**Key Words:** awareness, commitment, creation, environment, ethics, God, mission, nature

### Introduction

The Papal Encyclicals of the Catholic Church have been a powerful force in bringing awareness and change in how we view and act on the environment. The Church has been at the forefront of the environmental movement since from 1980 and has been teaching environmental ethics through its encyclicals. The encyclicals have addressed a wide range of environmental issues, from climate change and air pollution to biodiversity and sustainable development. The Popes have been a powerful voice for the environment, calling for urgent action and a renewed commitment to the care of God's creation.

Popes' Encyclicals have always been fruitful and proactive. They explore and express Popes' relationship with nature. Most importantly, it was the practice by which they detailed and reflected upon their experiences. They committed themselves to bringing their conservation philosophy into focus and made efforts to instill environmental ethics in the hearts of people. They reached out larger audience with their effective style of writing.

These writings also addressed the issue of environmental protection. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" (2009) proposed an ethical approach to the environment and economy. He focused on the need to balance economic growth with environmental care, encouraging the international community to develop innovative,

sustainable development strategies. Pope Francis' encyclical "Laudato Si" (2015) further addressed the need to protect the environment, stressing the importance of safeguarding the planet while also protecting the poorest and most vulnerable.

The encyclicals further provided a platform for the papacy to express its commitment to environmental protection, and to emphasize the importance of ecological stewardship. They also served as a source of inspiration for the people, to live more simply and to be mindful of their impact on the environment. By exploring the moral implications of environmental degradation and providing practical guidance on how to live sustainably, the encyclicals continue to be a valuable tool for the Church in its mission to protect the environment and the people who inhabit it.

The Church has been making continuous efforts to inculcate environmental ethics as per the cry of the conservationist namely Aldo Leopold who expressed in his writings that no important change in our ethical appreciation of nature could ever be accomplished "without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it."<sup>1</sup>

### **Environmental Ethics**

Environmental ethics is a branch of applied philosophy that studies the conceptual foundations of environmental values as well as more concrete issues surrounding societal attitudes, actions, and policies to protect and sustain biodiversity and ecological systems. For some ethicists and scientists, this attitude of respecting species and ecosystems for their own sake is a consequence of embracing an ecological worldview; it flows out of an understanding of the structure and function of ecological and evolutionary systems and processes. Each human being could hold many environmental ethics. New scientific fields have been involved in environmental protection of species and eco systems.

Environmental ethics are based on the idea that humans have an ethical responsibility to protect the environment and all its components. This includes not only living organisms, but also the land, air, and water in which they exist. It requires individuals to consider the impact of their actions on the environment and make decisions that are in the best interest of the environment. This can involve changes in behavior, such as reducing the amount of resources consumed and waste produced, as well as advocating for policy changes that promote environmental protection. Environmental ethics is also heavily connected to social justice, as it acknowledges the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and the need to ensure environmental protection for all communities.

We can find the reflection of the above thoughts in the statement of a land ethic Leopold wrote, "Simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include not only humans, but also soils, waters, plants, and animals—or what Leopold called the land."<sup>2</sup> This statement emphasizes that humans have a moral duty to care for and protect not only the human

community but also the natural environment. By recognizing the importance of the Common Home i.e. Earth, Popes believed that humans have a responsibility to maintain a balance between the needs of the human population and the needs of the natural environment. In other words, humans are part of a larger community that includes both the human and non-human elements of the environment, and this community should be respected and protected.

### **The Popes' Appeal**

The immediate need to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Popes' appeal is an invitation to all people of goodwill to take up an active role in the protection of our common home. We are asked to take personal and collective measures to defend our environment, promote a culture of care, and build a more inclusive and equitable society.

In response to this appeal, we can work together to reduce our ecological footprint and contribute to the global effort for sustainable development. We can advocate for the rights of the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized and work to ensure that all people have access to the resources needed for their integral development. We can advocate for policies that will protect the environment and promote renewable energy sources.

We can also make conscious decisions to live more simply and with greater respect for the environment. Finally, we can pray and act in solidarity with those who are most affected by environmental degradation. In these ways, we can respond to the Popes' call to protect our common home and ensure a better future for all.

In this connection, Pope Francis Wrote, "The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home. Here I want to recognize, encourage and thank all those striving in countless ways to guarantee the protection of the home which we share. Particular appreciation is owed to those who tirelessly seek to resolve the tragic effects of environmental degradation on the lives of the world's poorest. Young people demand change. They wonder how anyone can claim to be building a better future without thinking of the environmental crisis and the sufferings of the excluded."<sup>3</sup>

As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: "Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation. All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents."<sup>4</sup>

### **Global Ecological Movement in Encyclicals**

The encyclicals of the Catholic Church have long been a source of inspiration for the global ecological movement. In the early 20th century, Pope Pius XI called for the protection of the environment in his encyclical *Ubi Arcano Dei* (On the Mysteries of God). He argued that

human beings had a responsibility to take care of the environment and to respect its sanctity. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Pope Paul VI wrote a series of encyclicals that addressed the environmental crisis and called for conservation and the protection of natural resources. His encyclical *Octogesima Adveniens* (A Call to Action) outlined the need for a global effort to protect the environment and to promote sustainability.

His successor, Pope John Paul II, wrote several encyclicals that addressed the need for global environmental awareness and action. In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year), he argued for the protection of the environment and for the responsible use of natural resources. He also called for the recognition of the deep connection between humanity and the environment.

Finally, Pope Francis has been a strong advocates for the environment and has written encyclicals on the subject, including *Laudato Si'* (On Care for Our Common Home). In this connection, Let us examine the progress of the worldwide ecological movement in the writings of Papal Encyclicals, written from the period 1981 to 2020 which raised awareness among the people about the environmental challenges of diverse times.

#### **Populorum Progressio** (on the Development of peoples)

This encyclical was written by Pope Paul VI. In his letter he quotes from the Bible that “Fill the earth and subdue it: This teaches us that the whole of creation is for man, that he has been charged to give it meaning by his intelligent activity, to complete and perfect it by his own efforts and to his own advantage.”<sup>5</sup>

He wrote that “Now if the earth truly was created to provide man with the necessities of life and the tools for his own progress, it follows that every man has the right to glean what he needs from the earth. The recent Council reiterated this truth: “God intended the earth and everything in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should flow fairly to all.”<sup>6</sup> Through the above lines, the author inculcates the environmental values of Justice, charity and equity.

In the same letter, Paul VI also warns people of the dangers of degrading nature, polluting air and water, deforestation, and soil erosion. He exhorts mankind to use the resources of the earth in a responsible and sustainable manner.

He further states that “Man must respect the laws of nature, healthy laws which cannot be violated without distorting the balance of the universe and causing grave harm to him.”<sup>7</sup> The encyclical is a call to action for all. It encourages us to be responsible stewards of nature and use the resources of the earth in such a way that its beauty and fertility are preserved for generations to come. It reminds us that the environment is a common good and that we must all work together to protect it.

Pope Paul VI explains very clearly to the people that “It is not enough to increase the general fund of wealth and then distribute it more fairly. It is not enough to develop technology so that the earth may become a more suitable living place for human beings. The mistakes of those who led the way should help those now on the road to development to avoid certain dangers. The reign of technology—technocracy, as it is called—can cause as much harm to the world of tomorrow as liberalism did to the world of yesteryear.”<sup>8</sup>

He gives awareness to the people not to be addicted to Technology but to preserve the resources of the earth. He also emphasizes the importance of preserving the environment by saying that “The world of nature and the world of man must be united in a harmonious relationship if both are to survive.”<sup>9</sup> This statement encourages people to take care of the environment and to be aware of the impact of their activities on the environment.

He also speaks about the need to develop sustainable practices and the importance of sharing resources, so that everyone can have access to them. Paul VI’s words are relevant today, as the world is still struggling with environmental issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure a healthy and sustainable future. Technology is a tool that can be used to help us achieve this goal, but it can also be dangerous if not used responsibly. Therefore, Paul VI’s message is still relevant today, as it encourages us to be mindful of the impact of our actions on the environment and to strive for a more sustainable future.

#### **Laborem Exercens (Human Work)**

Pope John Paul II continued to speak out on environmental issues throughout his papacy. The Encyclical, “The Human work” addressed environmental issues was released in 1981 by Pope John Paul II. It was titled “Laborem Exercens” and it focused on the dignity of work and the need for economic and social justice. In this encyclical, the Pope called for a “responsible stewardship” of creation and an end to the abuse and misuse of nature. He also urged the faithful to take action to protect the environment, emphasizing the need to “safeguard the integrity of creation.” He wrote, “The deterioration of nature is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us humans, but because human life is deeply connected with the environment.”<sup>10</sup> He urged the world to take responsibility for the planet, to ensure its protection for the benefit of future generations.

The first papal encyclical to provide ethical principles of environmental protection. This encyclical asserted that humans have a responsibility to conserve and protect the environment, as it is a shared inheritance that has been entrusted to us by God. It also highlighted the importance of a just and equitable distribution of resources to sustain the environment. It is very vivid in the lines, “Man dominates the earth by the very fact of domesticating animals, rearing them and obtaining from them the food and clothing he needs, and by the fact of being able to extract various natural resources from the earth and the seas. But man “subdues the earth” much more when he begins to cultivate it and then to transform its products, adapting them to his own use.”<sup>11</sup>

The encyclical calls for the protection of the rights of the workers to a safe and healthy environment. It also emphasizes on the responsibility of the economic and political authorities to ensure the preservation and conservation of natural resources. Pope John Paul II also issued two other important documents related to the environment. The “Redemptor Hominis” (1979) stresses on the need to respect the environment, while the “Centesimus Annus” (1991) calls for a “true ecological conversion” that encourages humans to respect and care for the environment.

### **Sollicitudo Rei Socialis** (20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Populorum Progressio)

Pope John Paul II's 1989 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, was the second papal encyclical to address environmental ethics. This encyclical highlighted the need to consider human activities' effects on the environment and the importance of developing sustainable practices. It also called for an ethical approach to environmental protection, arguing that environmental degradation is a violation of human rights and an affront to God's creation. He exhorts the people of goodwill that “Among today's positive signs we must also mention a greater realization of the limits of available resources, and of the need to respect the integrity and the cycles of nature and to take them into account when planning for development, rather than sacrificing them to certain demagogic ideas about the latter. Today this is called ecological concern.”<sup>12</sup>

He further encourages the people to “act as faithful stewards of the Earth, taking into account the needs of the present and future generations. He stresses the importance of a mutual and global solidarity in order to protect the environment and to use the resources of the earth responsibly. He calls for the adoption of a universal moral code in order to protect the environment and to move towards a more equitable way of life for all. He also emphasizes the importance of international agreements for the protection of the environment, as well as the need for public authorities to take responsibility for protecting the environment.”<sup>13</sup>

John Paul II emphasizes the importance of the development of technology, science and economics in order to reduce poverty and to promote a more equitable distribution of resources. He calls for the creation of a new global solidarity that is based on mutual respect, justice and peace. In this encyclical, he acknowledges the various challenges that the world is facing and calls for the strengthening of international efforts to overcome these challenges. Finally, he encourages people of goodwill to take up the challenge of protecting the environment, promoting economic justice and working towards peace.

### **Centesimus Annus** (The Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum)

This encyclical was written by John Paul II in 1991. This is also an invitation to “look around” at the “new things” which surround us and in which we find ourselves caught up, very different from the “new things” which characterized the final decade of the last century. The encyclical is divided into three parts. In the second part, the Pope addresses the problems of contemporary society, including poverty, the gap between rich and poor, the growth of multinational corporations, and the environmental crisis. He calls for an ethical and spiritual renewal of society and insists that human work and labor be respected.

According to Pope John Paul II, “The original source of all that is good is the very act of God, who created both the earth and man, and who gave the earth to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits (Gen 1:28). God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favoring anyone. This is *the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods*. The earth, by reason of its fruitfulness and its capacity to satisfy human needs, is God's first gift for the sustenance of human life. But the earth does not yield its fruits without a particular human response to God's gift, that is to say, without work..... Obviously, he also has the responsibility not to hinder others from having their own part of God's gift; indeed, he must cooperate with others so that together all can dominate the earth.”<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, John Paul II emphasizes the need to create a new social and economic order based on justice, solidarity, and love.

### **Caritas in Veritate** (Charity in Truth)

The fifth papal encyclical to address environmental ethics was Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009. This encyclical highlighted the need to promote sustainable development, emphasizing the importance of considering environmental, economic and social factors when making decisions about development. “This responsibility is a global one, for it is concerned not just with energy but with the whole of creation, which must not be bequeathed to future generations depleted of its resources. Human beings legitimately exercise a *responsible stewardship over nature*, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population.”<sup>15</sup>

It also argued for a market-based approach to environmental protection and urged governments to work together to address global environmental issues. “Let us hope that the international community and individual governments will succeed in countering harmful ways of treating the environment.... The protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet.”<sup>16</sup>

“*The Church has a responsibility towards creation* and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, she must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. She must above all protect mankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: *when “human ecology” is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits*. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Laudato Si (On Care for Our Common Home)**

Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, was the sixteenth papal encyclical to address environmental ethics. This encyclical was the most comprehensive of the four, addressing a wide range of issues related to environmental protection and sustainability. It called for a shift away from fossil fuels and for the development of renewable energy sources. It also stressed the importance of caring for the earth, arguing that environmental degradation was a symptom of a deeper moral crisis.

It was a major step forward in the Church's commitment to environmental issues. He wrote, "The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once-beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish."<sup>18</sup> He called for an ecological conversion, a change in attitude and behavior to protect the environment. He also warned of the dangers of climate change and urged the world to take urgent action to combat it.

In his encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis makes a passionate plea to take care of our earth and to address the environmental crisis we are facing. He emphasizes that we must not forget that we are made of the earth's elements and that we must treat nature with respect and reverence, not as something to be exploited and abused. He calls on us to recognize our responsibility to protect the planet and to be stewards of its resources.

Pope Francis insists to take care of our earth that, "This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (*Rom* 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen* 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters."<sup>19</sup>

Pope Francis encourages us to recognize the urgent need for protecting the environment and to incorporate environmental values into our daily lives. He encourages us to learn about the science behind the ecological crisis and to be moved by its implications. He encourages us to develop an ethical and spiritual connection to our environment, to recognize our interdependence with nature, and to take action to protect it. He wrote in his encyclical that "It is my hope that this Encyclical Letter, which is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching, can help us to acknowledge the appeal, immensity and urgency of the challenge we face. I will begin by briefly reviewing several aspects of the present ecological crisis, with the aim of drawing on the results of the best scientific research available today, letting them touch us deeply and provide a concrete foundation for the ethical and spiritual itinerary that follows."<sup>20</sup>



### **Fratelli Tutti** (on Fraternity and social friendship)

The most recent papal encyclical to address environmental ethics was Pope Francis' *Fratelli Tutti* in 2020. The Pope describes it as a “Social Encyclical” which borrows the title of the “admonition” of Saint Francis of Assisi, who used these words to “address his brothers and sisters and proposed to them a way of life marked by the flavour of the Gospel”<sup>21</sup>. The Encyclical aims to promote a universal aspiration toward fraternity and social friendship. In the background of the Encyclical is the Covid-19 pandemic which, Francis reveals, “unexpectedly erupted” as he “was writing this letter”. But the global health emergency has helped demonstrate that “no one can face life in isolation” and that the time has truly come to “dream, then, as a single human family” in which we are “brothers and sisters all”.

It highlighted the importance of protecting the environment. He wrote, "We must take up an ecological approach which respects our common home and the dignity of every human being. We must become ever more aware of the gravity of the environmental crisis, and the need to confront it with a spirit of shared responsibility."<sup>22</sup> He urged people to work together to protect the earth and to care for all its inhabitants.

This encyclical reiterated the importance of greater global cooperation to address environmental issues. It also urged people to recognize the interconnectedness of all life and to embrace a "culture of solidarity" to promote sustainability. In conclusion, the papal encyclical called on all people of goodwill to take responsibility for the environment and to be mindful of the potential consequences of their actions on the environment. The encyclical called for a transformation of lifestyles and an embrace of a new "ecological spirituality" that recognizes the need to live in harmony with nature and to protect the earth.

### **Conclusion**

The Catholic Church has been providing valuable guidance on the environment since 1980. From Pope John Paul II's “*Laborem Exercens*” to Pope Francis’ “*Fratelli Tutti*”, these encyclicals have helped to create a deep sense of environmental ethics among the people. The Popes have addressed the need to protect the environment from the damaging effects of human activities such as pollution, deforestation, and overconsumption. The encyclicals also focus on the importance of sharing the earth's resources in a just and equitable manner. The Catholic Church has also taken specific action to protect the environment, including the creation of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. In addition to encyclicals, the Catholic Church has also taken action to promote environmental stewardship. For example, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops created a document in 2001 called “*Responsibility*”. The Catholic Church's commitment to environmental stewardship can be seen in its numerous initiatives and documents, as well as its efforts to educate its members on the issue. The Church has been a leader in the fight to protect the environment and has helped to create a culture of environmental ethics and responsibility.

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