

The Greening of American Catholicism: Identity, Conversion, and Continuity

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Environmental concern is emerging in all major American religious denominations; indeed, in every world religion. This has launched a process known as the “greening of religion.”¹ Many U.S. religious groups have begun to develop an environmental ethic, moving beyond reacting against Lynn White’s critique of Judeo-Christian religions to propose environmental stewardship and religious environmental education initiatives.² Recent disputes among American evangelicals about the role of environmental concerns have captured media attention,³ but other denominations, such as the Roman Catholic church and United Church of Christ, have pursued an environmental agenda for more than fifteen years. The greening of a specific religious group provides opportunities to analyze how religious leaders come to conceptualize new knowledge (about environmental problems) as having moral significance, a response to this as a religious duty, and the challenge of these issues as an opportunity to reassert their community’s religious identity.⁴ The investigation of religious environmental outreach of different scales, from international statements to national agendas to local initiatives, can offer insights for understanding the cultural processes of incorporating new responsibilities into a group’s collective religious ethical vision.

The dynamics in the process of “greening” a religious denomination can be understood as an exercise in practical theology because members of a faith community weave together new, extrinsic cultural values about environmental issues with existing traditions and norms specific to that group. Practical theologies emerge in dialogue between the tradition of a specific religious group, its values, and the broader cultural context.⁵ A general framework for interpreting how religious leaders and laity green their faith consists of the following stages. An initial response defines environmental problems as external to their identity and field of moral concern. This is followed by further

reflection, re-examining their theological resources (e.g., scriptures, moral teachings) to understand the significance of nature and the environment within their tradition, and determining how these might be brought to bear on contemporary problems. The next stage consists of leaders presenting their tradition as having specific resources to guide their group's response to environmental issues, fusing environmental responsibilities onto the existing identity of that group and putting them into action through programs. Environmental concerns are but one of many social issues competing for the agenda of religious leaders. Other members of a religious group may be motivated by more conventional "secular" environmental values irrespective of their religious identity. These generalized stages, however, can be discerned in most American religious groups that are in the process of greening. Analyzing the dynamics of this phenomenon reveals much about how a community understands the meaning of religious conversion. It also demonstrates the stability of religious identities and illustrates how leaders use new problems to reframe religious identities. Studying how one denomination has traveled through this process can help our understanding of the greening of other religious groups relatively new to this process.

Pope John Paul II legitimated Catholic concern for the environment worldwide through his numerous addresses about environmental stewardship. In particular, his World Day of Peace message in 1990, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*, charged Catholics with environmental duties and launched a flurry of Catholic social teaching along these themes. Scores of bishops and regional bishops' conferences have issued pastoral statements on Catholic environmental responsibility worldwide.⁶ In 1991, the U.S. bishops issued *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*, a pastoral letter articulating a Catholic environmental ethic for their American flock.⁷ It built organically upon the Catholic social teaching initiatives of the 1980s addressing peace and economic justice and endorsed a program for educating U.S. Catholics about this new responsibility. The emergence of what some U.S. Catholic leaders refer to as a "distinctly Catholic" contribution to environmental ethics can only properly be interpreted in light of a twenty-five year effort to foster a broader concern for justice among American Catholics. The letter drew from recent biblical studies emphasizing justice but borrowed language from the emerging American environmental justice movement of this period, with its roots in the civil rights movement and African-American Protestant churches.

This article begins by discussing the social processes used by the U.S. Catholic church to develop a practical theology of economic

justice and then situates the emerging environmental concerns within this economic justice framework. It then summarizes the development of papal magisterial teaching about stewardship, which draws from the international discourses about sustainability. This provides the global ecclesial context for the emergence of American Catholic environmental ethics. A discussion of the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the environment and associated programmatic initiatives follows. American Catholic environmental ethics have been expressed most fully through several regional initiatives focused on specific issues, and the article describes these, in Appalachia, the Pacific Northwest, and California's Central Valley. These are modest efforts and have, to a significant extent, been eclipsed in the public sphere by the sex/power scandals, but they reveal through their social processes what might be distinct about a "distinctively Catholic" environmental ethic. They also demonstrate how a religious group can achieve broader institutional goals for reinforcing identity, calling for conversion, and envisioning institutional continuity in their agenda for social engagement. The lessons from this case speak to the broad evolution of religious environmental ethics in American culture and can inform future studies of this transreligious phenomenon.

Consultations about Justice: A Process for Catholic Practical Theology

Over the past century, the Catholic church has formalized its practical theology as Catholic social teaching, an evolving set of principles representing its social vision, launched with the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Pope Leo XIII placed the social and economic concerns of that day firmly on the agenda of the Catholic church. Catholic social teaching has been most effective as practical theology when its values are articulated with concrete institutional initiatives expressing those values.⁸ The impressive scale of Catholic hospitals, schools, and charitable institutions built in America during the first part of the twentieth century cannot be fully understood apart from the influence of social teaching of that era. Recent Catholic environmental initiatives emerge against the backdrop of efforts to engage Catholic laity about economic justice and papal teaching about stewardship.

The Second Vatican Council called for greater collegiality in the exercise of teaching within the Catholic church, and Pope Paul VI encouraged regional and national initiatives to analyze their local pastoral situation for how best to make Catholic social teaching practical.⁹ He perceived decentralized theological reflection as essential to

the church's renewed emphasis on the promotion of justice in light of specific local conditions.¹⁰ In contrast to the relatively secret process for developing Vatican documents, the U.S. bishops created a more engaged, openly deliberative, and public process to draft, review, and revise pastoral letters during the 1980s. The two most visible examples addressed peace and economic justice. In the United States, the peace pastoral letter was the first process that demonstrated the potential of a local (in this case, national) church to be a leader in social teaching.¹¹

Under the leadership of Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee, a committee undertook a five-year process of listening, learning, and consulting while simultaneously drafting and revising the text of what would become a 208-page pastoral letter about the U.S. economy.¹² It restated Catholic social teaching principles with particular application to U.S. capitalism. Analyzing the content and impact of this pastoral letter is outside the scope of this article, but the process the bishops used is of particular significance here.¹³ The committee charged with writing the pastoral letter held numerous public hearings around the country to gather testimony from economists, business leaders, political scientists, and the poor themselves. The bishops sat in the audience, listened, and took notes. Once a draft letter was released, in 1984, the committee invited comments from anyone who cared to offer them. Many local dioceses sponsored panel discussions and meetings to comment on the content of the drafts. The letter passed through four drafts before being approved in November of 1986.

Most of the press coverage focused on controversies related to the issue of economic justice. At least five groups organized to discredit and resist the pastoral letter and its message.¹⁴ Most significant for the American Catholic church was the consultative process, which was more controversial among bishops than the letter's content. Archbishop Weakland said he was

... convinced of the importance of this process, an importance that goes beyond the perfecting of a text. The text is ultimately only a catalyst for a larger process of "forming church." It is a vibrant and creative way of using modern communications and the possibilities inherent in them to reflect together on what discipleship means for the world today. It has afforded us bishops an opportunity for performing our role in a unique way.¹⁵

Yet he also observed that opposition to this consultative process was rooted in concern that the bishops could be perceived as deficient in

their knowledge of social justice, thus compromising their teaching authority. He expressed doubt that, were this letter to be written again, the U.S. bishops would use the same procedure.¹⁶

The Second Vatican Council articulated a new vision for social engagement for Catholicism, but, in the United States, the consultative, collaborative process that developed these two pastoral letters provoked resistance from some leading Catholic laity who perceived the initiatives (and the bishops who authored them) to be activist and meddlesome. These critics did not understand how the poor and the reality of unjust economic systems had impacted the bishops through Catholic institutions, such as Catholic Charities or the Campaign for Human Development. Catholic Charities had a long history of providing “preventative charity” (advocacy for policies addressing poverty). Through its presence in 170 U.S. dioceses, it focused the attention of Catholics on the injustices and lack of participation suffered by poor people in their specific region.¹⁷ The creation of the Campaign for Human Development was a response to the poverty revealed by the race riots of the late 1960s.¹⁸ The campaign’s strategy for social engagement—enhancing opportunities for participation by those most affected by injustice to remedy that injustice—provided the U.S. Catholic church the most important expression of a practical theology of civic engagement.¹⁹ Advocacy for environmental protection by U.S. Catholics builds on this tradition.

From his experience steering the committee that wrote *Economic Justice for All*, Weakland proposed two practical theological tasks facing the American Catholic Church: making the faithful aware of the communal character of their human and Christian vocations and helping them understand their social responsibility as more than merely charity, as advocacy for system solutions.²⁰ Much of the criticism of this pastoral letter centered on its efforts to apply Catholic social teaching to specific circumstances, but Weakland argued that these specific evaluations were the most important dimension of this effort. The application of social teaching to the concrete circumstances of the American economy clarified and refined American Catholic practical theology.²¹ These efforts during the 1980s laid the foundation for American Catholicism to address environmental issues.

The Popes Speak: Sustainability and Moral Duties

Papal statements about the environment, stewardship, and moral duties to future generations provide background for interpreting the initiatives in the U.S. Catholic church. The development of

papal teaching about environmental ethics tracks very closely with international discourse about economic development.

The term “sustainability” entered the popular imagination through the report of the World Council on Economic Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission, published in 1987. The United Nations sponsored this effort to study the relationship between economic development and the environment. The commission’s report, *Our Common Future*, proposed a broader framework, one which integrated concern for the international economy, resource depletion, and environmental degradation. It asserted that all nations have a stake in fostering economic development but that it must be of a new kind: “sustainable.” The Brundtland Commission was the first to link these two concepts in its call for “sustainable development.” In its view, environmental protection should not be seen as an obstacle to growth but an aspect that needed to be reflected in policies if development was to be sustained.²² Sustainability is frequently defined simply as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. The U.N. and many nongovernmental organizations advance a more comprehensive understanding integrating environmental health, economic development, and social equity (“the three pillars of sustainability” according to U.N. agencies). Left undefined are what is to be sustained, for whom, and for how long.²³

Pope Paul VI was the first pope to use the term “environment” to describe natural resource problems in terms of duty. In his 1971 encyclical *Octogesima adveniens* he said, “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. . . . The Christian must turn to these new perceptions in order to take on responsibility, together with the rest of men [*sic*], for a destiny which from now on is shared by all.”²⁴ Paul VI sent a message to the 1972 U.N. Stockholm Conference titled “A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations.” He linked environmental problems with the development themes of previous encyclicals. In an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in 1975, he described environmental care as a form of solidarity with future generations. This was the first time that future generations were proposed as having moral standing in Catholic environmental teachings.

These initial expressions of concern for the environment on the part of Pope Paul VI did not purchase much attention among U.S. Catholics during this period because they did not fit within their

existing moral worldviews. Liberal, socially engaged Catholic laity were much more concerned about poverty and the injustice of social structures, while more conservative concerned Catholics disregarded environmental concern because they perceived it to be a novel issue, unrelated to their tradition. The latter objected vociferously to the environmental rhetoric of human population control.²⁵

Pope John Paul II made explicit the link between global poverty and environmental degradation during his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979).²⁶ In it he argued that pollution and resource problems indicated that creation “was subjected to futility,” along with war, poverty, and a lack of respect for life. “Technologically enhanced exploitation of the earth for military and industrial purposes alienates humankind from nature, and turns us from ‘guardian’ to heedless exploiter and destroyer. . . . By submitting man [*sic*] to tensions created by himself, dilapidating at an accelerated pace material and energy resources, and compromising the geophysical environment, these structures unceasingly make the areas of misery spread, accompanied by anguish, frustration and bitterness.”²⁷ As a prescription, he proposed a fresh interpretation of the Genesis creation account to present a contemporary and relevant theological anthropology and a rediscovery of the vocation of work and human stewardship of God’s creation. “The essential meaning of this ‘kingship’ and ‘dominion’ of man [*sic*] over the visible world, which the Creator himself gave man for his task, consists in the priority of ethics over technology, in the primacy of the person over things, and in the superiority of spirit over matter.”²⁸ John Paul II re-emphasized that the “dominion” of Genesis 1:28, popularly perceived as according humans the right to exploit the earth, should be interpreted to mean stewardship responsibilities for the earth, to care for it on behalf of future generations. These themes continued throughout the corpus of his teachings but were punctuated with new emphases.

Throughout the 1980s, John Paul II decried the lack of economic opportunity in the developing world while simultaneously warning against the excesses of consumerism in the industrial world. In *The Ecological Crisis*, John Paul II framed the ecological crisis unambiguously as a moral crisis for humanity and the environment as ethically significant in its own right, regardless of its role in economic development. He decried the long-term effects of the indiscriminate application of science and technology. Reflection on this “has led to the painful realization that we cannot interfere in one area of the ecosystem without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.”²⁹ He described many ways in which environmental problems afflict

contemporary human society and laid out a set of duties for a cluster of actors in an interdependent world.³⁰

Today, the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone. As I have pointed out, its various aspects demonstrate the need for concentrated efforts aimed at establishing the duties and obligations that belong to individuals, peoples, States, and the international community. . . . When the ecological crisis is set within the broader context of the search for peace within society, we can understand better the importance of giving attention to what the earth and its atmosphere are telling us: namely, that there is an order in the universe which must be respected, and that the human person, endowed with the capability of choosing freely, has a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations. I wish to repeat that the ecological crisis is a moral issue.³¹

John Paul II emphasized the moral implications of human treatment of the environment but advanced the moral claims of future generations on our actions today.

The Vatican explicitly endorsed the concept of sustainable development in its intervention at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002. This missive reiterated the pope's commitment to all three pillars of the U.N. sustainability agenda:

The Holy See is deeply committed to the values that inspire actions and decisions regarding sustainable development, since the deliberations that take place have a particular historical context and lead directly to concepts of the person, society and the common good. It must be recognized that juridical, economic and technical measures are not sufficient to solve the problems that hamper sustainable development. Many of these problems are issues of an ethical and moral nature, which call for a profound change in modern civilization's typical patterns of consumption and production, particularly in the industrialized countries. In order to achieve this change, we must encourage and support the "ecological conversion."³²

The first principle of sustainable development articulated by the 1992 U.N. Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro is: "human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development." Ten years later, Pope John Paul II fully endorsed this approach to stewardship.

These statements reveal a tempered form of anthropocentrism, one charged with moral duties. Pope John Paul II critiqued the

same radical anthropocentric perspective as has Lynn White but emphasized human responsibilities to care for the poor and steward the environment. He did not emphasize a biocentric equality of species. The creation accounts in Genesis endow humanity with stewardship responsibilities, with the obligation to care for the earth on behalf of the Creator and future generations. His proposal of "ecological conversion" is a prescription for remedying the failure of humanity to practice responsible stewardship. Thus, Pope John Paul II drew on the international discourses about sustainability to articulate a vision for environmental protection, which is quite compatible with the notions of justice developed by Catholic social teaching during the twentieth century. For example, he explicitly endorsed the sustainable development agenda and the United Nation's millennium development goals.³³ Yet he framed the implementation of the sustainable development agenda as an ethical responsibility and humanity's failure to steward the earth's resources and ensure just distribution of its goods as a moral failure. To remedy this, he advanced a traditional Catholic response to injustice: repentance and conversion.

Articulating an American Catholic environmental ethic

The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility provoked responses from bishops and from national and international bishops' conferences. A few statements were written prior to 1990, but the pace picked up after *The Ecological Crisis*, indicating the legitimacy accorded to this issue by John Paul II. In 1986, the U.S. bishops first identified the need for an environmental ethic in *Economic Justice for All*.

All people on this globe share a common ecological environment that is under increasing pressure. Depletion of soil, water and other natural resources endangers the future. Pollution of air and water threatens the delicate balance of the biosphere on which future generations will depend. The resources of the earth have been created by God for the benefit of all, and we who are alive today hold them in trust. This is a challenge to develop a new ecological ethic, one that will help shape a future that is both just and sustainable.³⁴

The letter addressed food and agriculture as one of four selected policy issues and decried the continuation of agricultural practices that deplete the environment and constitute "a danger to future food production because these practices are not sustainable."³⁵

In 1991, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (renamed the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in 2001)

issued the pastoral letter *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching*.³⁶ Coming just five years after the economic justice pastoral, it reinforced Catholic social teaching on justice, although the bishops did not employ the same consultative process to create it.³⁷ It appears to have been written to interpret Pope John Paul II's teachings on the environment in a more specific way for an American audience. The divergent responses to the emergence of Catholic environmental ethics reflected the existing fractures among American Catholic laity. The more liberal American Catholic laity, who had rejected the environment as a morally neutral backdrop, now recognized a healthy environment as socially beneficial and also began to see it as morally significant in its own right. More traditional sectors of the laity, which had not embraced *Economic Justice for All*, largely ignored *Renewing the Earth*.³⁸

Renewing the Earth proposed a "distinctly Catholic" contribution to addressing environmental crises. It fashioned an environmental ethic using familiar Catholic social teaching themes: a sacramental universe, a consistent respect for human life, common good, solidarity, universal purpose of created things, and an option for the poor. In keeping with John Paul II's vision, it presented a vision of stewardship as human responsibility. But more than the papal statements had, it emphasized continuity between socio-economic justice and environmental justice. Just what constitutes a "distinctly Catholic" response to the environmental crisis is not explicitly defined by any official document. Determining that meaning requires further investigation.

The term "environmental justice" was first articulated in a religious context in a 1987 report of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States*.³⁹ The environmental justice movement grew out of previous U.S. social movements for justice (civil rights, labor rights, and community organizing movements). Its vision for an alternative environmental movement grew as scholars began to describe the common patterns of environmental harm suffered by inner-city African Americans, Native Americans on reservations, and rural Mexican Americans (especially farmworkers).⁴⁰ During the 1980s and 1990s, the movement focused most of its efforts on local, urban initiatives to address toxic waste disposal and workplace hazards (including pesticides). Scholars played a critical role in framing these local initiatives as a national movement, and some Protestant churches, especially the United Church of Christ and African American congregations active in the civil rights movement, conferred legitimacy on the effort.⁴¹

Thus, the origin of the term “environmental justice” is distinctly American, emerging from the convergence of populist social justice movements, the religio-ethical discourse of African American Protestant churches, and antitoxic community organizing efforts. Luke Cole and Sheila Foster describe the environmental justice movement as a “conceptual fusion” of these movements and as a critique of conventional environmentalism, which had disregarded issues of race and economic equity.⁴² The environmental justice movement was a very strong activist movement during the early 1990s, organizing affected communities, committing civil disobedience against polluters, and demanding changes in regional, state, and federal laws. Organizers had remarkable access to the Clinton White House and were able to raise this issue to the national level during this period.

By the time *Renewing the Earth* was written, the environmental justice movement had established its alternative environmental agenda with an explicit focus on the needs of poor communities. By framing Catholic environmental ethics as a justice issue, the bishops emphasized continuity with its broader social teaching tradition, which was rooted in a biblical vision of justice. “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.”⁴³ The bishops rhetorically framed Catholic environmental justice as building organically on their economic justice advocacy of the 1980s. This was consistent with a broader movement within socially engaged American Christianity to link biblical visions of justice with economic and environmental justice. This discourse aligned Catholic environmental ethics with the social vision of the American environmental justice movement. Church leaders did not, however, endorse the same assertive methodologies of political engagement as the secular movement.

Drawing from the U.N. sustainability discourse, *Renewing the Earth* proposed the term sustainability to refer to economic policies, agricultural practices, and technologies.⁴⁴ “Sustainable economic policies, that is, practices that reduce current stresses on natural systems and are consistent with sound environmental policy in the long term, must be put into effect. At the same time, the world economy must come to include hundreds of millions of poor families who live at the edge of survival.”⁴⁵ The letter took a global perspective, expressing concern for the needs of the poor in the developing world. It closed with an invitation to diverse sectors of society “to understand and act on the moral and ethical dimensions of the environmental crisis.”⁴⁶

The letter did not substantively address questions of human population growth, nor irreversible biological losses due to human activities.⁴⁷

The bishops provided financial support for their environmental initiatives through the "Renewing the Earth: Environmental Justice Program." By its title, this effort signaled its continuity with the bishops' emphasis on economic justice launched during the 1980s. Program manager Walter Grazer described this program as developing a pastoral strategy to help the U.S. Catholic church address emerging concerns about ecology and the environment. He described the challenge of developing theoretical and practical theologies to respond to the novelty of environmental problems as religious problems. He observed that failing to speak out about the environment could be a "sin of omission," but that advancing a Catholic environmental ethic not rooted in the existing religious imagination of the faithful risks its dismissal as mere "ideology or idealism."⁴⁸ Grazer is among the leading Catholic voices for environmental protection. A close analysis of his discourse suggests that he understood a "distinctly Catholic" response to environmental problems to emphasize collective, social responsibility built organically on this religious tradition; it should reinforce Catholic religious identity and not be confused with other forms of environmental leadership consisting of mere ideology and idealism.

The program's tripartite strategy helps Catholics, their parishes, and institutions integrate environmental concerns into their everyday lives, thematically links environmental protection with social justice, and fosters local and regional initiatives to address specific environmental concerns.⁴⁹ The program has developed educational kits, convened theologians to address environmental issues from a Catholic perspective, and partnered with existing national Catholic organizations to address environmental issues. For example, the Campaign for Human Development began providing a million dollars annually in environmentally related antipoverty efforts. The U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services redefined its mission to include sustainable development. The National Council of Catholic Women linked its advocacy for children with environmental health. The National Catholic Rural Life Commission, started during the farm crisis of the 1920s, drew from *Economic Justice for All* in the 1980s to make sustainable agricultural practices and policies a strategic priority. This commission has provided environmental advocacy within the U.S. Catholic church second only to the bishops' program. Thus, many national Catholic nongovernmental organizations added environmental concerns to their agendas during the 1990s, reflecting the U.S. bishops' desire that environmental justice be recognized as

another dimension of ongoing justice work, not a new or discrete project for Catholics.

The U.S. bishops applied Catholic social teaching to two overarching environmental issues in their pastoral statements on global climate change and on food and agriculture in 2001 and 2003, respectively. In these, they developed the practical implications of sustainability. In *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good*, the bishops framed contemporary societal ethical obligation in temporal terms: the present generation has an obligation to practice stewardship on behalf of the future. "At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. . . . It is about our human stewardship of God's creation and our responsibility to those who come after us."⁵⁰ The letter also appealed for action on behalf of youth and the poorer nations of the world.

Environmental ethics, like health care ethics, rely heavily on expert scientific knowledge.⁵¹ The science of global climate change is a charged political issue, especially in the United States.⁵² A very small percentage of scientists have contested the scientific evidence that environmental leaders use to argue for reducing carbon dioxide emissions.⁵³ As a result, a significant portion of the U.S. public has been uncertain whether global climate change is in fact occurring and whether the U.S. government should take action. The bishops addressed this issue by proposing the virtue of prudence to guide public policy on this issue.

The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing global climate change. . . . In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed. Significant levels of scientific consensus—even in a situation with less than full certainty, where the consequences of not acting are serious—justifies, indeed can obligate, our taking action intended to avert potential dangers. In other words, if enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind's well-being, prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative action. This responsibility weighs more heavily upon those with the power to act because the threats are often greatest for those who lack similar power, namely, vulnerable poor populations, as well as future generations.⁵⁴

This statement elaborates more specifically the concerns about the application of science and technology advanced by Pope John Paul II and echoed by the U.S. bishops. The proposal has unmistakable

similarities to what environmental leaders and public interest ecologists call the “precautionary principle.”⁵⁵ It makes explicit the moral responsibility of those taking action to consider the needs of future generations. Thus, it extends the notion of the common good to include those yet to be born or yet to be adults. By articulating the Thomistic virtue of prudence in a current policy debate, the bishops drew on traditional ethical resources to speak to contemporary environmental problems.

The U.S. bishops have demonstrated a special interest in food and agriculture for most of the past century, and they re-emphasized this in 2003 with *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers*. Sustainability runs through this pastoral letter as a background theme, but its use reflects its plasticity as a term. The letter refers to sustainable food supply and “sustaining rural communities” three times each. Five times the letter describes or calls for sustainable agriculture, or sustainable agricultural practices, to reflect stewardship ethics: “Farmers should expand the use of environmentally sustainable methods so that farmland in the United States can provide food for generations to come.”⁵⁶

In *Renewing the Earth*, the U.S. bishops wrote, “the fundamental relation between humanity and nature is one of caring for creation.” They issued an invitation to American Catholics to consider their environmental responsibilities. Drawing from the writings of John Paul II, they provided more specific guidance to their flock. Coming just five years after *Economic Justice for All*, this letter does not introduce new principles but, rather, the application of established social teaching principles to a new arena, the environment, emphasizing continuity between economic justice and environmental concerns. Awareness of these initiatives among ordinary Catholics is quite low, but these efforts represent the foundation for continued Catholic engagement with environmental issues.

The U.S. bishops sought to develop a “distinctly Catholic” approach to environmental problems, and this apparently links a vision for a more just society with popular educational efforts to promote a more sustainable society. Although a comparative analysis of U.S. efforts with statements by Catholic bishops in other countries is beyond the scope of this article, the U.S. bishops appear to have emphasized the essential link between economic justice and environmental protection more than their counterparts elsewhere. The U.S. Catholic bishops’ vision of “distinctly Catholic” may have a dimension that is “distinctly American” as well. The U.S. bishops want to distinguish themselves from dominant, conventional

environmentalism, and their discourse has located them closer to the environmental justice movement. The “distinctly U.S. Catholic” approach appears consistent with the social vision of the environmental justice movement—emphasizing social equity and pollution prevention—but favors a much more polite form of civil responsibility: fostering consensus dialogue on the common good while eschewing civil disobedience and avoiding the perception of being activist. This methodological approach is reflected in the regional initiatives.

Regional Catholic initiatives

Regional environmental projects are the most innovative cultural expression of the greening of American Catholicism. Activities include consulting within Catholic parishes and institutions, developing pastoral letters to address local environmental concerns, and creating regional, civic deliberative processes to identify and advocate ethical public policy. The national Environmental Justice Program has funded priest and lay retreats to address the damage to the Mississippi River delta in Louisiana, a New Jersey conference on faith and environmental justice, and a meeting to address water stewardship in New Mexico.⁵⁷ Inspired in part by the more ambitious projects in Appalachia and the Pacific Northwest, several regions of bishops have issued shorter and less ambitious pastoral letters on the environment, usually restating core Catholic social teaching principles as they apply to environmental concerns.⁵⁸ Common themes include a call for better stewardship of the earth, more authentic models of economic development, and attention to the crisis in agriculture and rural communities.⁵⁹ They reflect Paul VI’s call for social teaching to be carried forward by the church at the local level. Three regional initiatives are examples of a “distinctly Catholic” method of social engagement with environmental problems in America. They also reveal how leading American Catholics understand the public implications of their environmental ethic.

Several regional groups of U.S. bishops have addressed environmental issues and sustainability using a process of social learning similar to that undertaken by the U.S. bishops for *Economic Justice for All*. Twenty years after the Catholic bishops of Appalachia wrote *This Land Is Home to Me*, a pastoral letter on the social struggles and efforts to provide hope in this region, they issued a new letter, *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995).⁶⁰ This letter was “creatively guided” by a team of seventeen, drawn from the drafting committee, but it was signed by twenty-five bishops from the region. The impetus for both of these

letters was a group of local church workers seeking to project a positive vision of life in the region. This group engaged in a consultative process with the blessing of the region's bishops, who then added their signatures to the letter.⁶¹

Appalachia has long been treated as a resource colony, and this letter proposes the creation and defense of "sustainable communities" as a task for Catholics and all people of this region. The letter defines these communities as ones "where people and the rest of nature can live together in harmony and not rob future generations."⁶² It presents the creative people of Appalachia with a vision of sustainable forests, agriculture, families, livelihoods, spirituality, and communities. The letter explicitly quotes from the Brundtland Commission and argues that sustainable communities cannot be realized outside of an alternative, sustainable development model. This is altogether appropriate given the economically marginal position of the region within the United States. *At Home in the Web of Life* offers the most explicit elaboration to date about the relationship between sustainability and Catholic social teaching. It combines many examples of local efforts to advance sustainable communities yet also offers a compelling, alternative moral vision for the human/nature relations in Appalachia. It does not offer a specific prescription but, rather, a moral vision for how people in this region could live with each other and with their environment in greater harmony. This letter has served as an analytical framework for interpreting what regional Catholics identify as environmental injustices and has provided legitimacy to parishes and individuals advocating for environmental protection. The initiative came from clergy and laity within the region. Bishops have affirmed the vision, but most of the advocacy efforts have been initiated locally.

The best known regional environmental pastoral letter was issued by the twelve bishops of the eight dioceses in the Pacific Northwest, British Columbia, and Alberta: *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* (2001). In 1997, these bishops banded together because they were all from the region that feeds waters into the Columbia River, which underscored their desire to situate their environmental theology in the local.⁶³ They sought an "integrated spiritual, social and ecological vision for our watershed home, a vision that promotes justice for people and stewardship of creation."⁶⁴ The bishops appointed eighteen representatives to serve on a steering committee, which held hearings throughout the watershed. Select members of the steering committee developed an initial draft of the letter, which went through several revisions and was subjected to additional hearings.⁶⁵ The bishops released the letter in its final form in 2001.

The final version effectively uses the symbolism of water to convey a coherent sense of place and identity in this region, appealing to biblical images of baptism and healing. It is the first pastoral letter focused on a specific watershed.⁶⁶ It is organized into four sections: rivers of our moment, rivers of our memory, rivers of our vision, and rivers of our responsibility. The last section provides ten “considerations for community stakeholders” that form a practical theology of Catholic social teaching to the Pacific Northwest. These emphasize the relationship between the common good and the geographic commons of this watershed, an integrated vision of economic and environmental justice solutions, and care for the vulnerable, including endangered wildlife and indigenous people and their livelihoods. The letter demonstrates the way in which terms with the root “sustain-” have become part of the official Catholic discourse on the environment without necessarily being defined in any specific way. This letter holds out hope for a “sustainable future,” an “ecologically sustainable place,” “regional sustainability,” “environmental sustainability,” “sustainable economic development,” “sustainable timber systems,” and “sustainable ecological relationships.”

Douglas Burton-Christie draws our attention to the significance of the redaction of drafts into the final letter.⁶⁷ Several innovative characteristics were present in the 1999 draft but omitted in the final version.⁶⁸ The final edition cut out poetic and visionary images, evocative of the watershed-as-place, in the interest of ensuring the letter had popular appeal. The 1999 draft linked racism, sexism, and classism to “speciesism,” or an anthropocentric ideology. This term was omitted in the final version. The terms “sacramental” and “sacramental commons” were used prominently to frame the task of the letter in 1999, but these terms disappeared in the final version. Despite the emphasis given these concepts by John Paul II and *Renewing the Earth*, they were edited out because some bishops were uneasy with the implications of the world as sacramental.⁶⁹ After the conference at the University of Portland that unveiled the final draft, the dioceses of the region offered few resources for follow up, and there is scant evidence of this project having any lasting impact on laity who were not already concerned about the environment. Nevertheless, this pastoral letter is widely recognized as a significant effort to develop a local Catholic environmental theology.

California’s Central Valley is the poorest, most diverse, and fastest-growing region in California. It also has some of the worst air quality in the nation and is host to relentless land and water resource battles.⁷⁰ Over the past several years, the Catholic diocese of Stockton, located just east of the San Francisco Bay Area, has created

a regional effort to address environmental issues. Once Bishop Stephen Blaire was installed in Stockton in 1999, he learned how profoundly environmental conflicts affected his diocese. He hired Richard Fowler to direct the diocesan office of social ministries, and Fowler began to organize socially engaged Catholic laity for charitable and social justice activities. Fowler came to Stockton after years of community organizing for the archdiocese of Washington, D.C., and was surprised by the scope of environmental issues in the Central Valley. He noted how few institutions in this region were capable of convening rational dialogue among stakeholders about environmental issues. He was subsequently promoted to executive director of Stockton Catholic Charities. This placed the office of social ministries within Catholic Charities, making explicit the link between social service and advocacy.

Fowler secured a grant from Walt Grazer of the U.S. Catholic Conference's environmental justice program in 2003. Bishop Blaire invited the other two Central Valley bishops, from Sacramento and Fresno, to collaborate on a regional environmental initiative, but they declined. Bishop Blaire convened a meeting in his own diocese in 2004 to determine how best to begin the project. After hearing a report about the region's environmental problems and a summary of Catholic social teaching resources, the bishop interpreted the Genesis account of creation, echoing the themes of Pope John Paul II. He then recommended a series of town hall style meetings to consult with laity and clergy in the diocese. Over the next year, three gatherings of roughly eighty persons each reviewed the main subjects of the initial scoping meeting and, at the end, proposed several strategies for proceeding. The diocese decided to emphasize improving air quality because childhood asthma rates reach 20 percent in the region, air pollution affects everyone, and starting with this issue would be the least likely to engender resistance to the diocese addressing environmental concerns. Bishop Blaire invited anyone interested to join an environmental justice committee, convened by the office of social ministries. This committee was open to any and all who wished to volunteer their time and included approximately twenty active lay members. Their first task was to prepare educational resources for a diocese-wide "Environmental Justice Sunday," which was part of October 2005's "Respect Life Month." The bishop proposed this so that environmental justice would be seen as part of the broader American Catholic social agenda, along with opposition to abortion, euthanasia, and the death penalty. Successive Octobers in this diocese have emphasized that "respect life issues" include environmental justice issues.

Much of the initial work of the committee was to reach out to members of the diocese and to partner with conventional environmental organizations about air quality issues. To that end, the diocese hired a full-time community organizer to help parishes integrate environmental justice themes into their life and ministries. The committee continues to fuse environmental justice themes to existing religious education activities, emphasizing human stewardship responsibilities. The Stockton diocese initiative reflects the U.S. bishops' desire to foster a "distinctly Catholic" contribution to the issue of environmental justice. Participants emphasize an inclusive approach in their ongoing work, ensuring that farmers are engaged and encouraged to improve their stewardship. Their materials emphasize the moral and social justice dimension of environmental stewardship, with a particular emphasis on the health of children. At a town hall meeting in January of 2005, Fowler proclaimed that this initiative was not undertaken because the participants are environmentalists but, rather, because they are Catholics carrying out their responsibility to care for the poor and the earth.⁷¹ Fowler is evidently concerned that the environmental leadership be intrinsically Catholic informed by a moral vision. In his view, apparently, having a moral concern for the state of the planet is a critical Catholic responsibility but being identified as an environmentalist is not.

One of the more striking patterns to emerge from these three regional efforts is the direct collaboration between one or more bishops and the laity. These initiatives carry forward Weakland's vision of collaboratively "forming church." There has been a remarkable absence of parish priests, however. The dramatic decline in the number of ordained clergy (and their morale) makes them less available, but it also appears that few diocesan clergy perceive these initiatives as integral to their priestly responsibilities. These three efforts have provided a vehicle for bishops to teach the laity about the broader significance of the Catholic moral vision, but they also provide a framework for socially engaged laity to incorporate this social concern into their religious identities. This is significant because of the opportunity it affords laity to recognize the contemporary relevance of their religious tradition and its values. Strongly conservative laity have actively disregarded the social justice thrust within American Catholicism over the past two decades and have continued this stance with regard to environmental issues. The vast majority of laity are unaware that these kinds of initiatives even exist, yet these types of regional projects are important because they demonstrate how concerns within American culture are beginning to be woven in to a religious tradition.

Conclusion: Something Old and Something New

This article analyzes the cultural dynamics in the greening of one particular religious denomination and thus contributes to our understanding of the broader greening of religion in the United States. On the one hand, the application of Catholic social teaching to environmental problems is novel. But on the other, it is merely one of the latest extensions of Catholic social teaching principles to a set of emerging concerns. The official documents and regional initiatives have picked up on the “distinctly American” rhetorical framing of environmental justice while continuing the U.S. Catholic tradition of promoting civil responsibility and economic justice. Very little in the U.S. bishops’ statements on the environment is new. They draw on traditional social teaching and apply this to emerging concerns, but they also draw on the environmental justice and sustainability discourses within American society.

The accumulated evidence of the human impact on the environment has prompted Catholics—from popes to bishops to laity—to re-examine scripture and existing social teaching and to make stewardship ethics a component of American Catholic theology. The concepts and language of sustainability—interpreted by these parties as the practical application of stewardship—have become the overarching framework for environmental ethical duties in Catholic social teaching. This approach appeals to socially engaged Catholics because it builds organically on the themes of development and economic justice emphasized by Vatican II. Environmental initiatives deliberately borrow the sustainability framework from the United Nations the linkage of economic justice and environmental protection from the environmental justice movement. For some bishops and laity, these discourses provide a moral framework for enrolling others in their environmental initiatives.

Catholic leaders grafted environmental ethics onto economic justice principles and extended human stewardship responsibilities to future generations. The U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter was important for conferring legitimacy on environmental concerns, but the most dynamic programmatic expression of this ethic has been the series of regional initiatives, which bring Catholic social vision to bear on local issues through lay civic engagement. Collectively these programs constitute the emergence of a practical theology of the environment for the American Catholic church. These programs are relatively small and poorly known due the few resources allocated to them, but they portend increased public engagement with environmental concerns by U.S. Catholics.

Catholic leaders want church members to express a “distinctly Catholic” contribution to environmental concerns. This term is not well defined but suggests their concern for cultivating environmental values within the framework of a Catholic identity, not subverting religious identity to conventional, “secular” environmental values. I have argued that the greening of American Catholicism builds upon extant theologies of social justice (conversion) but grafts onto these new moral responsibilities while reinforcing identity (continuity). Catholic initiatives reinterpret the Genesis accounts of creation to emphasize moral duties and draw from the Catholic vision of a sacramental universe to project a vision of human stewardship for the created world. This ethic builds on traditional Catholic teaching and values and creates a new element, a “sustainability ethic,” from discourses in broader civil society. By adopting this sustainability ethic, American Catholics are able to add a new stewardship ethic to their social teaching agenda and participate in civic environmental discussions. These initiatives, though chiefly sponsored by bishops, have given the laity a vehicle for expressing their environmental values. The initiatives raise provocative questions about how American religious groups address environmental problems while simultaneously sustaining their identities.

The regional initiatives described in this article reflect the dynamic relationships between cultural values, the concerns of the laity, and the importance of church leaders conferring their authority on a new issue of concern. These regional initiatives reflect the desire of some bishops to use participatory processes to form church, in the words of Weakland. They also demonstrate the opportunity that some Catholic leaders see in reinscribing Catholic identity in emerging concerns within contemporary culture. They facilitate lay Catholics adding their voices to environmental concerns, but they also provide vehicles for participation in the life of their local church. Several dedicated environmental activists who are Catholic have expressed relief that their church is beginning to “catch up” with their views but also feel some frustration with the slow pace and modest ambition of these initiatives. Many persons—Catholic and other—have commented on the value of using ethics language to frame responses to environmental problems.

The “distinctly Catholic” contribution to environmental ethics draws on Catholic social teaching and emphasizes continuity with its ethical vision, including social responsibility for the economically marginalized and stewardship of the common good. These are not novel principles, but participants in these initiatives have expanded them to cover an emerging moral concern. Catholic environmental

statements and initiatives reveal a tempered form of anthropocentrism, one charged with moral duties. Catholic environmental ethics in the United States are much more like that of the environmental justice movement. The national and regional Catholic initiatives have set out to accomplish their goals through moral appeal for conversion and have actively discouraged rancor in their discourse. This “distinctly Catholic contribution” can be understood to disregard certain areas of conventional American environmentalist ethicists: no Catholic environmental initiative has addressed the moral implications of the size of the human population. Catholic environmental initiatives tend to address economic equity rather than population growth.

Future research into the greening of religion could focus more specifically on the anthropological processes as religious groups negotiate the tensions between their religious and environmental identities. It may be worthwhile to investigate how conversion paradigms within religious groups shape the dynamic process of developing an environmental ethic. For example, liberal Protestant churches generally place a great emphasis on the role of social context and responsibility in conversion experiences. Does the traditional evangelical emphasis on the individual’s decision to become a disciple provide an alternative interpretive framework for understanding the emergence of evangelical environmental theology?

The greening process within American Catholicism has been both slow in pace and modest in its scope. Nonetheless, evidence here illustrates efforts of a Christian tradition to develop a practical environmental theology. Catholic leaders have drawn from their tradition and its moral vision, reinterpreted a key text, and engaged laity in regional discernment processes. By also drawing from contemporary environmental discourse about sustainability and justice, the Catholic church is attempting to make its vision of stewardship practical for American culture.

Notes

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1. This is a rapidly emerging field; for an introduction, see Roger Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet’s Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim, “The Greening of the World’s Religions,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 9, 2007, 25–27. For a comprehensive overview, see Bron R. Taylor, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (Bristol: Continuum, 2005).

2. 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 they espoused a critique of anthropocentrism and organized religion. They reacted against the arguments of Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (March 10, 1967): 1203–7. White argued that how people think about their relationship to the natural world shapes their behavior toward the environment and that the Bible and medieval Christianity set Western civilization out on a path of environmental degradation. He also claimed that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen" (1204). This set off a firestorm of debate about the role of religious attitudes in contemporary environmental problems. For many years, White's arguments were the obligatory point of departure for any discussion of religion and the environment, although this is no longer the case. For some early theological analysis, see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *A Worldly Spirituality: The Call to Take Care of the Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); and J. Baird Callicott, "Genesis and John Muir," in *Covenant for a New Creation: Ethics, Religion, and Social Policy*, ed. Carol S. Robb and Carl J. Casebolt (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991). After Pope John Paul II's *The Ecological Crisis* and the increased visibility of environmental problems sparked by Earth Day 1990, U.S. Christian denominational leaders began to consider the possibilities of constructing programs guided by a theology of the environment. The most visible was the National Religious Partnership for the Environment; see William Somplatsky-Jarman, Walter Grazer, and Stan L. LeQuire, "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*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 573–90.

3. Laurie Goodstein, "Evangelical's Focus on Climate Draws Fire of Christian Right," *New York Times*, March 3, 2007, A9; Laurie Goodstein, "Evangelical Leaders Join Global Warming Initiative," *New York Times*, February 8, 2006, A12; Alan Cooperman, "U.S. Evangelical Group Firm on Climate Stance," *Washington Post*, March 11, 2007.

4. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith*.

5. Practical theologies develop principles to guide the actions of individuals and communities. Practical theology begins and ends with practical concerns. It uses communal inquiry processes to determine a course of action in light of new social situations. I use the term practical theology to mean the application of wisdom from one's religious

tradition to guide present action. For background, see Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

6. Duties to the environment and future generations now appear in statements by popes and bishops in many countries. By 1996, forty-eight statements by bishops' and regional bishops' conferences worldwide had been issued. Drew Christiansen, S.J., and Walter Grazer, eds., *"And God Saw That It Was Good": Catholic Theology and the Environment* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1996), 18 n. 4. An updated collection and comparison of all the episcopal statements on the environment is much needed.

7. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1991).

8. Marvin L. Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching and Movements* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1998).

9. Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, par. 4.

10. Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 277.

11. Ibid.

12. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986).

13. Many analyses of the economic pastoral letter exist. See Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 313–45, and Rembert G. Weakland, "The Economic Pastoral Letter Revisited," in *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought*, ed. John Coleman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 198–209.

14. Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 323.

15. Rembert G. Weakland, "The Economic Pastoral: Draft Two," *America* 153 (September 21, 1985): 132, cited in Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 315–16.

16. Rembert G. Weakland, "'Economic Justice for All' Ten Years Later," *America* 196 (March 22, 1997).

17. The work of Catholic Charities is described in Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 333–37.

18. In the wake of the riots, several bishops called for a "national Catholic crusade against poverty." Quoted in Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 338. The campaign is unusual in that it only funds projects in

which the poor themselves have a dominant voice over their purpose. It represents an effort to help the poor help and speak for themselves.

19. For case studies examining the impact of the Campaign for Human Development, see John P. Hogan, *Credible Signs of Christ Alive: Case Studies from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003).

20. Weakland, "The Economic Pastoral Letter Revisited."

21. Weakland, "'Economic Justice for All' Ten Years Later," 9–10.

22. World Council on Economic Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

23. For a discussion of the contradictions of the sustainability discourse and the concept of sustainable development, see Patricia Allen, ed., *Food for the Future: Conditions and Contradictions of Sustainability* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1993); Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs, "The Social Side of Sustainability: Class, Gender, and Ethnicity," *Science as Culture* 4, no. 13 (1991): 569–90; and Michael Redclift, *Sustainable Development: Exploring the Contradictions* (London: Routledge, 1987).

24. Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, 21.

25. See Patrick Allitt, "American Catholics and the Environment, 1960–1995," *Catholic Historical Review* 84 (April 1998): 263–81.

26. Major sources on the environmental teachings of John Paul II include: Marjorie Keenan, R.S.H.M., ed., *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment, 1972–2002* (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2002); Ancilla Dent, O.S.B., ed., *Ecology and Faith: The Writings of Pope John Paul II* (Berkhamsted, England: Arthur James, 1997). *Laborem Exercens* provides an exegesis of Genesis as the basis for his theological anthropology, emphasizing the vocation of human work and co-creation. John Paul II's *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, issued in 1987 on the twentieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (an encyclical about economic development), analyzed the challenge of development through the lenses of scripture and his own theological anthropology.

27. John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 15–16.

28. *Ibid.*

29. John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," in "*And God Saw That It Was Good*," ed. Christiansen and Grazer.

30. He appealed to the cooperation of all social and political actors, much as Pope John XXIII did in *Pacem in Terris*. For analysis, see Mich, *Catholic Social Teaching*, 99–106.

31. John Paul II, "The Ecological Crisis," 15.

32. Renato Martino, "Intervention by the Holy See at the World Summit on Sustainable Development," Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2, 2002.

33. Pope John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, "Joint Statement at the Fourth Symposium on Religion, Science and the Environment, Rome/Venice," June 10, 2002.

34. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Economic Justice for All*, n. 12.

35. *Ibid.*, n. 227. The economic pastoral used the term "sustainable" twice, once to refer to environmental stewardship and once to sustainable agriculture.

36. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth*. Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles, then chair of the bishops' international policy committee, recommended the creation of this letter. See Somplatsky-Jarman, Grazer, and LeQuire, "Partnership for the Environment," 580.

37. John Paul II's letter provoked responses in other Christian traditions as well. In 1992, the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, the National Council of Churches in Christ, the Evangelical Environmental Network, and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops came together to form the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, which has become the central organizational structure for fostering environmental education and advocacy by religious leaders in the United States. This partnership is described in Christiansen and Grazer, eds., "And God Saw That It Was Good," 4–5, and Somplatsky-Jarman, Grazer, and LeQuire, "Partnership for the Environment."

38. For discussion and background, see Allitt, "American Catholics and the Environment." Allitt argues that, in the aftermath of Vatican II, socially engaged American laity initially framed their work in terms of analysis of structural injustice and poverty alleviation initiatives. The broader social awareness of the pervasiveness of environmental problems during the late 1980s coincided with papal teachings and U.S. bishops' statements. Leading traditional American laity, however, had objected to the economic justice initiatives, as well as liturgical and catechetical reforms, criticizing them as novel. Socially engaged laity in developing countries could not escape perceiving the linkages between environmental protection and resource availability for the poor and economically marginalized.

39. The creation of this report and its role in the environmental justice movement is described in Vernice Miller-Travis, "Social Transformation through Environmental Justice," in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Hessel and Ruether, 559–71.

40. Robert D. Bullard, "Anatomy of Environmental Racism and the Environmental Justice Movement," in *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, ed. Robert D. Bullard (Boston: South End Press, 1993), 15–39.

41. Miller-Travis, "Social Transformation through Environmental Justice."

42. Luke W. Cole and Sheila R. Foster, *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), chap. 1.

43. "Renewing the Earth," in "And God Saw That It Was Good," ed. Christiansen and Grazer, 225.

44. It used the terms "sustainable economy" or "sustainable world community" or "sustainable development" eight times. It used "sustainable" to modify agriculture or agricultural policies three times, and policies and technologies three times. It called for "a change of heart to preserve and protect the planet for our children and for generations yet unborn."

45. "Renewing the Earth," 225.

46. *Ibid.*, 240–42.

47. This emerging Catholic environmental ethic does not yet take seriously the scale of the human population's impact on the environment. Statements by John Paul II and the U.S. bishops generally acknowledge a southern hemisphere "demographic problem which creates difficulties for development." *Renewing the Earth* proposed that "sustainable social and economic development" is the key factor for dealing with population problems. According to most demographic experts, this is necessary but not sufficient to manage the earth and its resources in a sustainable way. Both John Paul II and the U.S. bishops have raised questions about the developmental trajectory of technology and capitalism in contemporary society, but they have not identified specific actors responsible for taking alternative actions, shy of "public officials" or "industrial leaders."

48. Christiansen and Grazer, eds., "And God Saw That It Was Good," 2, and Somplatsky-Jarman, Grazer, and LeQuire, "Partnership for the Environment," 579.

49. Somplatsky-Jarman, Grazer, and LeQuire, "Partnership for the Environment," 583.

50. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2001).

51. James B. Martin-Schramm and Robert L. Stivers, *Christian Environmental Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2003).

52. James Gustave Speth, *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004).

53. Scientific skeptics of global climate change have generally been funded by private industry; see Ross Gelbstan, *Boiling Point: How Politicians, Big Oil and Coal, Journalists and Activists Are Fueling the Climate Crisis—and What We Can Do to Avert Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

54. U.S. Catholic Conference, *Global Climate Change*, 4.

55. Carolyn Raffensperger and Joel Tickner, *Protecting Public Health and the Environment: Implementing the Precautionary Principle* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999).

56. U.S. Catholic Conference, *For I Was Hungry and You Gave Me Food: Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 2003), 11–12.

57. Somplatsky-Jarman, Grazer, and LeQuire, "Partnership for the Environment."

58. The Florida Catholic Conference issued "Companions in Creation" on January 1, 1991, exactly one year after Pope John Paul II's *The Ecological Crisis*. The bishops of New Mexico published a brief letter about the environment in the context of an environmental justice conference: New Mexico Catholic Conference, *Partnership for the Future: Caretaking New Mexico's Life-Giving Rivers, River Stewardship Conference* (Albuquerque: New Mexico Catholic Bishops, 1998). The Boston province of Catholic bishops published *And God Saw That It Was Good* in 2000. It included an examination of the specific New England concerns of agriculture and fisheries. Four times it recalled the responsibility of the present for the future and future generations. The New Jersey Catholic Conference created the New Jersey Catholic Coalition for Environmental Justice; see Patricia Lafevere, "The Push for Ecological Conversion," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 15, 2003.

59. This is especially true of "Care for the Earth," written by the Indiana Catholic Conference in 2000. The bishops of Montana, Minnesota, and Wisconsin have also addressed stewardship in light of the farm crisis.

60. Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *At Home in the Web of Life* (Webster Springs, W.Va.: Catholic Committee of Appalachia, 1995).

61. Beth Dotson, "Sustaining Life and Faith in Appalachia," *St. Anthony Messenger*, September 1997, 13–17.

62. *Ibid.*, 13.

63. William S. Skylstad, "Waters of Life," *America*, November 24, 2003, 13–15.

64. Columbia River Pastoral Letter Project, *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good* (Seattle: Washington Catholic Conference, 2001), 1.

65. Pamela Schaeffer, "Restoring the Sacred in Nature," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 4, 1999, 18–20.

66. For an excellent analysis of this letter, see Douglas Burton-Christie, "The Spirit of Place: The Columbia River Watershed Letter and the Meaning of Community," *Horizons* 30, no. 1 (2003): 7–24. I am indebted to Burton-Christie for his interpretation of this letter.

67. *Ibid.*

68. Columbia River Pastoral Letter Project, *The Columbia River Watershed: Realities and Possibilities* (1999).

69. Burton-Christie, "The Spirit of Place," 19, n. 20.

70. Isao Fujimoto, *Building Civic Participation in the Central Valley: Getting to Know the Central Valley* (Davis: California Institute for Rural Studies, 1998); Jane V. Hall, Victor Brajer, and Frederick W. Lurmann, "The Health and Related Economic Benefits of Attaining Healthful Air in the San Joaquin Valley" (California State University Fullerton, Institute for Economic and Environmental Studies, March 31, 2006); and J. Edward Taylor and Philip L. Martin, "Central Valley Evolving into Patchwork of Poverty and Prosperity," *California Agriculture* 54, no. 1 (2000): 26–32.

71. Richard Fowler made this statement at the third town hall meeting, January 22, 2005, Oakdale, California.

ABSTRACT Environmental concern is emerging in all major American religious denominations, a process known as the “greening of religion.” The dynamics of a greening process illustrate how individuals incorporate emergent social concerns into their existing moral worldviews and show the ways in which religious identities shape that process. Analyzing the dynamics of this phenomenon reveals much about how a community understands the meaning of religious conversion, demonstrates the stability of religious identities, and illustrates how leaders use new problems to reframe religious identities. The greening of American Catholicism builds upon prior efforts to extend a practical theology of social justice (conversion) but articulates new moral responsibilities for future generations while reinforcing identity (continuity). Pope John Paul II opened a new domain for Catholic social teaching by his numerous teachings about environmental stewardship. U.S. Catholic greening efforts built organically upon the Catholic social teaching initiatives of the 1980s, addressing peace and economic justice, and the emergence of what some refer to as a “distinctly Catholic” contribution to environmental ethics should be interpreted in light of these efforts. This term is not precisely defined, but it suggests a concern for cultivating environmental values within the framework of a Catholic identity and for not subverting Catholic religious identity to conventional “secular” environmental values. The rhetorical framing of environment concerns by an ethic of justice was drawn from the biblical vision of justice, but it was influenced by the American environmental justice movement that emerged during this period. The most innovative expression of the greening of American Catholicism has been a set of regional initiatives, bringing Catholic social vision to bear on local issues through lay civic engagement. The lessons from this study speak to the broad evolution of religious environmental ethics in American culture and can inform future studies of this transreligious phenomenon.