Bonaventure in Benedict: Franciscan Wisdom for Human Ecology
Keith Douglass Warner OFM

John Paul II introduced the expression “human ecology” into Catholic teaching with *Centesimus annus* (John Paul II 1991). This expression has appeared in other Vatican documents, and it was used extensively by Pope Benedict XVI in several high profile addresses (Benedict XVI 2009, 2010a). US Catholics, leaders and laity, have generally ignored this term. It is scarcely used. Why is this? I do not intend to answer this question directly. Instead I will draw from the thought of St. Bonaventure, a thirteenth century Franciscan theologian and doctor of the church, to propose an explanation for why Pope Benedict deployed this expression. The answer lies, in part, in Josef Ratzinger’s intellectual journey and his understanding of how to access wisdom from the Catholic tradition for its application to the needs of the contemporary world. The future Pope Benedict engaged Bonaventure as a “dialogue partner” when he researched and wrote his *habilitationsschrift* (Ratzinger 1971). Pope Benedict continued to express great affection for Bonaventure and his Franciscan wisdom. By retracing Pope Benedict’s intellectual footsteps we can better understand the potential of the expression “human ecology” to engage Catholics to care for God’s creation. This methodology of retrieving wisdom from our Catholic tradition and presenting it in a form meaningful to our contemporary society holds promise for Catholic engagement with climate protection, but perhaps also for preaching the Gospel message in an era of new evangelization.

Here is a brief outline of the argument in this chapter. For eight centuries, the Franciscan tradition has drawn from St. Francis’ passionate love of creation to develop an intellectual tradition that expresses a positive view of the created order. Francis is held up as the premier model of Christian care for creation, and was named patron saint of “ecological spirituality” by Pope John Paul II in 1979 (see discussion in Warner 2011b). Francis was not what we would call a theologian, but his spiritual and intuitive understanding of God expressing love through creation was brought into scholastic thought by early Franciscans, most notably Bonaventure (1217-1274). Bonaventure conveyed Franciscan insights through his philosophy and theology. For example, Francis found Christ present in all creation, singing affectionately of animals and elements in familial terms. Bonaventure elaborated Francis’ insights to express a radically Christocentric vision of all created reality.

Josef Ratzinger was one of the most important Catholic intellectuals of the 20th century. Aiden Nichols OP (2007) lists 99 books and 374 journal articles published by Ratzinger between 1954 and 2004. Through his *habilitationsschrift*, “The Theology of History in Bonaventure,” Ratzinger engaged Bonaventure’s wisdom theology that explains how God reveals God’s self in creation and time. Ratzinger’s writings echo some elements of Bonaventure’s religious philosophy. Indeed, as Nichols has observed, Ratzinger follows in the footsteps of philosopher-theologians in the Catholic wisdom tradition, as exemplified by Augustine and Bonaventure. As will be discussed below, Bonaventure’s influence on Ratzinger was less in terms of content and more through his thought structure. Bonaventure articulated a symbol-laden, integrated understanding of God’s self-revelation through all reality. For Bonaventure, since God is relational, all created reality is necessarily relational. Bonaventure proposed a Christian metaphysics of the good which is a metaphysics of relationality (Delio 1999, 2007). Francis was one important influence on Bonaventure, and Bonaventure was one important influence on Pope Benedict. Thus, we might consider how Franciscan wisdom might help us understand Pope Benedict’s understanding of humanity’s relationship to creation in salvation history.
In this light, the expression “human ecology” communicates with contemporary resonance a classic understanding of creation within the Catholic tradition. This expression has the potential to speak from the Catholic tradition to contemporary human society, which is more influenced by technoscientific materialism than Christian faith. Indeed, we may consider this expression to have a surplus of meaning, for it invites the Catholic community to consider how it should be interpreted (Ricoeur 1976). By recognizing the wisdom tradition that underlies Pope Benedict’s use of this expression, the US Catholic Church may be able to use it to appeal more broadly for climate protection initiatives.

With the argument now outlined, this essay will develop it in the following order. It begins with an introduction to Bonaventure’s Franciscan wisdom. It then presents his fundamental philosophical insights that convey his understanding of the importance of creation to salvation history. The essay then returns to consider evidence for Bonaventure’s influence on Pope Benedict and to propose several steps for applying this framework more fruitfully in the US Catholic Church.

Bonaventure and Franciscan Love of Wisdom

Francis of Assisi cannot be considered a philosopher or theologian in any formal sense, but recent scholarship has characterized his popular, affective, embodied, and intuitive approach to Incarnational spirituality. He can be well described as a “vernacular theologian” (Monti 2001; for background on the term “vernacular theology,” see McGinn 1998). Francis exerted a profound influence on the trajectory of medieval Catholic spirituality, and through the Franciscan movement, on theology, philosophy, spirituality and art, social ethics and the practice of social engagement.

Recent scholarship demonstrates how Francis’ spirituality inspired the more learned and sophisticated thought of his subsequent followers. Our contemporary, popular understanding of Francis as a model of sentimental spirituality distorts his witness and the significance of the Franciscan movement he launched. Efforts by Franciscans to return to the spirit of their founders, prompted by Vatican II, have yielded an understanding of Francis’ Christian discipleship that is more radical and potent. Scholarship is now articulating the influence he had on this movement, and through his followers, upon church and society. Francis launched a lay reform movement that emphasized devotion to the Incarnation, Eucharistic adoration, an inclusive, familial spirituality, and practical expressions of compassion within society. The Franciscan movement grew quickly to be one of the most influential currents in medieval Catholicism.

As the direct and indirect influence of Francis’ charismatic witness on medieval Catholic thought has come into clearer focus, contemporary scholars have defined one expression of this as the Franciscan intellectual tradition (Osborne 2003, 2008). There were 5,000 Franciscan Friars by the end of Francis’ life, and 30,000 within a generation. Franciscan and Dominican Friars arose concurrently with the rise of medieval universities and contributed much to their development in the Middle Ages. Franciscans made substantial contributions to the fields of philosophy, theology, natural sciences, and socio-economic ethics in medieval Europe and beyond. Contributions to this development can be termed the Franciscan intellectual tradition -- this is broader than theology and philosophy -- which is a branch of the Catholic intellectual tradition. The very idea that a Franciscan intellectual tradition existed in the historical past may be news to some. Indeed, without appropriate academic tools, it may be difficult to discern such a phenomenon, because the most important contributions by Franciscan thinkers were so fully incorporated into the broader Catholic tradition that their origins in the Franciscan movement are indiscernible.
Francis’ vernacular theology inspired the development of academic institutions that were themselves undergoing transformation under the influence of new discoveries and the retrieval of ancient knowledge from the Greeks. The Franciscan approach complements the other two major intellectual traditions within Catholicism: the Augustinian and Thomistic (or Dominican). All three conduct theology within the Catholic tradition, yet in their diverse interpretive approaches, they provide a broader array of theological resources.

No components of a tradition interpret themselves. To access wisdom from any historical religious tradition requires a retrieval methodology (Schaefer 2009). Recent scholars have undertaken the retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition, including theology, cosmology, and social philosophy. This retrieval project articulates these features of Franciscan thought with contemporary forms of knowledge and social concerns. The word “tradition” comes from the Latin tradere, meaning to transmit or deliver. This suggests that traditions are not static treasures to be defended, but rather living memories and values, and ways of knowing and being that are shared from one generation down to the next. This requires a method that addresses the following questions:

1. What components of our tradition do we wish to select for retrieval?
2. How do we appropriately interpret these elements in light of present need?
3. How can these components be appropriately combined with contemporary forms of knowledge?

These are the tasks for the retrieval of the Franciscan intellectual tradition, and as a methodology, retrieval holds out broad potential for engaging and sharing the riches of the Catholic tradition (Warner 2011a). This paper cannot fully address these questions, but it can explore their applicability in proposing the contemporary relevance of Bonaventure’s thought for Catholic care for creation.

Bonaventure is arguably the greatest example of a Franciscan intellectual leader. In his work we find the intuition and spirit of Francis translated into formal philosophy and systematic theology. When Bonaventure became a Franciscan, he was attracted to the spirituality of Francis as expressed by his followers. As a scholar and university teacher, Bonaventure might seem to have little in common with the poor man of Assisi, but they share a radically Christocentric spirituality, a belief that God is revealed through creation, and an understanding that all creation is essentially good and relational in character.

Bonaventure is a remarkable intellectual figure in his own right, yet he cannot be properly understood apart from his identity as a Franciscan Friar. He joined the friars at an early age, spent more than 15 years studying, teaching and living as a Friar Minor at the University of Paris, and was the seventh minister general of the Franciscan order. He held that office for 17 years, steering the order through internal divisions and external attacks that threatened its integrity and survival. He wrote one of the most remarkable and influential works in medieval Christian spirituality, Itinerarium Mentis in Deum (which can be best translated as The Journey of the Soul into God). Bonaventure, like any great thinker, can be read from multiple perspectives. Scholarly analysis of the influences on Bonaventure suggest they be ranked thus: Scripture, Augustine, Francis, Aristotle, Pseudo-Dionysius, Hugh of St. Victor, and Anselm (Bougerol 1964). Bonaventure’s thought has enjoyed a resurgence of interest, in part because it engaged and transformed patristic philosophical and theological concepts, and synthesized a more conducive framework for dialogue with contemporary sciences including ecology and evolution.
This essay will highlight his contributions as a Franciscan religious philosopher, drawing on the ancient understanding of philosophy as love of wisdom. Bonaventure, following Augustine, sought to express an integrative and practical wisdom (Hayes 1997). Integrative wisdom holds that the purpose of (Christian) philosophy is to unify reality in the human mind and its understanding (Hayes 1994). Neither a fragmentary approach to knowledge and knowing, nor a dualistic worldview, could be compatible with philosophy in this tradition. Franciscan philosophy is practical, meaning that knowledge never exists for the sake of possession, but rather to grow in love of God, and to help everyone follow in the footprints of Jesus Christ (Boehner 2005; Hayes 1997). Bonaventure conveyed his understanding of wisdom as holistic and integrative: “There are some dimensions of wisdom that relate to our intellect, others that relate to our desires, and others that are to be lived out. Therefore, wisdom ought to take possession of the entire person, that is with respect to the intellect, the affective life, and the person’s action” (Bonaventure, “Sermon on the Kingdom of God II,” in Hayes 1999, 334). This Franciscan Catholic understanding of philosophy as integral and practical wisdom diverges fundamentally from many contemporary forms of academic philosophy.

Bonaventure’s thought integrated several intellectual and spiritual currents. He achieved a remarkable synthesis of speculative theology and affective spirituality, of Eastern and Western Christian spirituality, of abstract symbolism and practical embodied experience. A leading expert in Bonaventure’s thought, Cousins (Cousins 1978), described Bonaventure as achieving for spirituality what Thomas of Aquinas did for theology and what Dante did for medieval culture. He described Bonaventure as platonizing Franciscanism and Franciscanizing neoplatonism. By this Cousins meant that Bonaventure wove together into a coherent, seamless system Scripture, Patristic thought, scholastic philosophy and the passion of Francis’ Incarnational spirituality. Bonaventure’s thought is fundamentally synthetic, meaning that he synthesized a coherent and complete whole out of these distinct influences. The elements of his thought were historical or traditional, but his synthesis created a fresh approach to Christian wisdom for the people of his era.

For the purpose of this chapter, the historical influences on and theological content of Bonaventure’s thought are less important than the implications of his thought structure for understanding Franciscan wisdom. Bonaventure can be approached through our modern lenses of theology and religious philosophy; however, the integral character of his approach to wisdom does not fit comfortably within the compartments of these modern academic disciplines. The noted scholar Etienne Gilson claimed that Bonaventure’s thought is of such remarkable harmony and unity that one sees the whole or nothing at all (Gilson 1938). His thought structure seems peculiar to those with a modern, technoscientific worldview, which is highly compartmentalized, fragmented and reductionistic. However, Bonaventure’s approach to wisdom may be the very balm we most need.

Bonaventure’s integral thought structure can be represented by a circle, suggesting completeness or wholeness. In God all life originates, finds expression in the time and space of the created order, and discovers its ultimate destiny in return to God. The Trinity is the template for this circular movement. Bonaventure understands God to be an infinite primordial mystery of self-communicative love. God the Father is the origin, sustainer and consummation of all created reality. Bonaventure describes the action of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as central to the manifestation of God’s love: “Such is the metaphysical Center that leads us back and this is the sum total of our metaphysics: concerned with emanation, exemplarity, and consummation, that is, illumination through spiritual radiations and return to the Supreme Being. And in this you will
be a true metaphysician” (Bonaventure 1970, 10). Everything flows from the Father (emanation) and ultimately returns to him (consummation). Exemplarity expresses the “conviction that all of created reality is grounded in the divine archetypal reality and manifest the mystery of the divine in the created realm to some limited degree” (Hayes 2003b, 95). The concept of exemplarity is essential to understanding Bonaventure’s thought (Bowman 1975). Exemplarity reflects Augustine’s presentation of “the divine idea.” This strongly influenced Bonaventure who stated that “things” have a two-fold existence, to be themselves and to be in the divine mind as exemplars (Cullen 2006). The concepts of emanation, exemplarity and consummation are interrelated, dynamic components operating through every dimension of Bonaventure’s thought system. Together they function as a conceptual framework for expressing God’s love, God’s activity in the world, the Incarnation, and the wisdom expressed through creation (Hayes 1976). Bonaventure’s thought structure provided a paradigm for understanding the relationship of Jesus Christ to all created reality, in the spirit of St. Francis.

Bonaventure’s Metaphors and Trinitarian Metaphysics

Bonaventure understood creation to have an essential role in salvation history. He did not express what we would recognize today as an environmental ethic but, rather, a (medieval Franciscan) Catholic worldview which could not conceive of creation independently of the relationship between God and humanity. Creation is not a distinct topic for him, but instead one of several themes that integrate his many writings. He conveyed his theological wisdom of creation through a system of religious metaphors, a metaphysics rooted in the Trinity, and a vision for human beings in salvation history.

Bonaventure deployed a rich system of symbols to convey how God reveals God’s self through creation. Cousins (1978) proposed a gothic cathedral as the best organizing metaphor to convey the integral character of Bonaventure’s symbol system to modern people. The superstructure of a cathedral represents the designed cosmos that discloses the mind of its creator. The entire interior of the cathedral is designed to focus attention on the centrality of the Crucified Jesus; this is the purpose of creation and the cathedral. The massive doors, doorways, and stained glass windows recount salvation history. The light that enters the cathedral illuminates those inside with wisdom, grace and love.

The following are examples of Bonaventure’s religious metaphors of creation and how he used them to communicate God’s plan for the cosmos.

1. Word, speech and book: Bonaventure understood reality as two books, “one written within, namely the eternal Art and Wisdom of God; and the other written without, namely, the perceptible world” (Hayes 2003a, 255). In his Collation on the Six Days, Bonaventure wrote: “the entire world is, as it were, a kind of book in which the Creator can be known in terms of power, wisdom and goodness which shine through in creatures” (Hayes 1999, 63). Creation is thus an external Word of God, the “speech” of God, expressed in finite time and history. Creation discloses God and God’s love, and these metaphors help us recognize this deeper purpose. Components of creation and creation as a whole serve as symbols of the divine (Hayes 2003a). Creation, like Jesus, comes from God, helps us to perceive and understand God, and leads us back to God.

2. Mirror: the book of creation is akin to a mirror, for as one studies creation, one learns more about God, and as one comes to understand God, one recognizes God’s love in creation. This points to the importance of the natural sciences to help understand the character of God and God’s artistry revealed through creation and its purpose.
3. Circle: Bonaventure used the circle many times in his works as a symbol of the Trinity itself, and to describe the movement of divine life into, through and back from creation. Salvation history is played out in a dynamic setting.

4. Water and river: Bonaventure used a fountain as a theological image for God’s love. The Father is the “fountain fullness” from which the river of reality flows, both within the mystery of God’s self and outside the divinity in the form of creation. Bonaventure frequently described creation as a river that flows from that spring of God, spreading across the land to purify it and make it fertile, and flowing back to its origin (Delio 2001).

5. Song: the Latin *carmen* can be translated as song or poem. Bonaventure compared the universe to a beautifully composed song, another image that he borrowed from Augustine. Yet, he developed this metaphor further, insisting that full appreciation of a song requires grasping the entire melody— not only the individual notes, but also their inter-relation with pitch, rhythm and tone. His use of this image points to the necessity of understanding the individual components of creation as well as their integral whole. Only by grasping the whole can the harmonious structure of creation become clear.

6. Light and window: light is a metaphor for divine reality and divine life. Bonaventure understood every creature (not only humans) to have within itself a shining forth of divine life. The entire material cosmos is a window to the divine, and its rich diversity of creatures reflects the depth and richness of God (Hayes 2001).

God created the cosmos and created it with purpose, intention. Two Latin keywords used by Bonaventure illustrate God’s intention for creation: *manifestare* and *participare*. “The cosmos manifests the mystery of God in the nondivine. And creation is called into being so as to participate in ever deeper levels in the mystery of the divine life” (Hayes 1997, 53). Creation’s purpose is to communicate to us who God is, and how we humans are to respond. The created order is to help us perceive, understand and love God. In technical terms, this is a semiotic metaphysics (Cullen 2006). Creation is capable of bearing that communication, and we humans are capable of understanding that message. Question: could contemporary Catholics believe that creation communicates something of God to human beings?

To draw from these positive metaphors for creation would be helpful today. However, this “use” of Bonaventure’s metaphorical language to assert creation’s goodness is a superficial reading of what he sought to convey. There is a very tight relationship between creation and the God as Trinity. Indeed, the Trinity is the foundation of Bonaventure’s entire theological program, and the Trinity for Bonaventure is relational. Bonaventure drew from the fourth-century Cappadocian Patristic tradition that understood Trinity to be a community of divine persons, not Trinity as the unity of God’s substance per Augustine. Bonaventure’s theology of the Trinity holds together divine essence and divine relationality. They must always be presented in a common frame. They cannot be properly examined or presented independently. Relationship or relationality is the basis for a trinitarian theology of God, not vice versa. For Bonaventure, God is in essence communicable. “The main point of Bonaventure’s trinitarian theology is that the very nature of God is relational, and that it is only in and through meditation on this basic relational nature of God that one can formulate the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit” (Osborne 2011, 119). In other words, before we can even use the term “Trinity” we have to recognize the relational dimension of God.

Being (*Summum Ens*) itself is good and relational. Bonaventure’s approach to metaphysics reflects his Trinitarian theology: God is good and God is relational; therefore, being is good and relational; therefore, all reality is good and relational. Trinitarian life finds
expression in the structure of the universe, from macrocosm to microcosm. “The reality of Christ pertains to the very structure of reality: as Word, to the reality of God; as incarnate Word, to the reality of the universe created by God” (Hayes 1994, 72). This has significant implications for the relationship of scientific inquiry and theological inquiry. From a Franciscan perspective, a priori, these cannot essentially contradict each other. Question: could contemporary Catholics believe that the deeper, metaphysical structures of created reality reflect something of the character of God?

Bonaventure understood humanity to have a special relationship with the cosmos and other forms of life, and to have a critical, distinct role in salvation history. In the Breviloquium, he wrote:

Hence, it is undubitably true that we human beings are the end of all existing things. All material things are made to serve man, and to enkindle in him the fire of love and praise for the Maker of the universe through whose providence all is governed. Therefore the fabric of [God’s] sensitive body is like a house made for man by the supreme Architect to serve until such time as he may come to the house not made by human hands ... in the heavens (Bonaventure 1963, 77).

Although we are, according to Bonaventure, bent over by sin and not able to fully perceive how creation calls us into union with its creator, he nonetheless has a positive understanding of humanity and its role in the created order. The book of creation has been rendered opaque by our sin. Just as God created creation for fecundity and harmony, the vocation of human beings is to foster these. We are intended for a central role in God’s plan for creation. “The material world stands most properly at the service of humanity when it enables human beings to realize the end of God’s creative activity by awakening in them the conscious appreciation, love, and praise for the Giver of the gift of created existence. It is thus that humanity gives a conscious, loving voice to what otherwise would remain a mute creation” (Hayes 1994, 68). In other words, the destiny of humanity and the material cosmos are utterly entwined.

Here again the image of the circle conveys the movement of humanity and creation through time. As Zachary Hayes OFM explains,

The circle is a symbolic expression of the conviction that creation is the movement of finite being from nothing into historical existence and ultimately to that fullness of personal life in union with God that Christians understand to be salvation. Creation and salvation, though distinguishable conceptually, are inseparably related. In its fullest sense, salvation is the actualization of the deepest potential that lies at the heart of created reality by reason of the creative love of God. ... The visible creation is the objective expression of the Word that lies at the center of the divinity. ... The theology of the return of creation to God is, in essence, the theology of history. If we move this line of thought but a step further, it appears that eschatology is the attempt to articulate that point at which the curve of creation and history bends back on its point of origin. It is the doctrine of ultimate fulfillment of the created order. ... The return of creation to God, then, is in essence a journey through history, and the fulfillment of the universe is inseparably related to that of humanity (Hayes 1994, 79).

Bonaventure understood consummation and how creation and humanity travel the path of salvation history together as bringing all created reality into ultimate communion with God. Question: could contemporary Catholics believe that human beings have an essential role in bringing to consummation all creation’s fulfillment in God?

Pope Benedict’s Journey into the Mind of Bonaventure
Benedict XVI spoke in very positive ways about his appreciation for the Franciscan tradition. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Church as People and House of God in Augustine, and framed this in terms of Christianity’s philosophical dialogue with late Roman culture. He wanted to continue his research into the dialogue between theology, philosophy and culture by investigating the interrelation of “revelation -- history -- metaphysics.” He focused his *habilitationsschrift* to address questions of the relationship between salvation history and metaphysics in the context of the retrieval of Aristotle’s corpus in the 13th century and the currents of religious thought about the character of time. Bonaventure’s work was more amenable to this line of inquiry than Aquinas’s, since Ratzinger wanted to dialogue with medieval conceptualizations of revelation through time (Ratzinger, 1989, xii). This was of considerable academic concern in the 13th century: what is time, how is God operating within time, and how is time as humans know it related to salvation history? Bonaventure engaged this question within the context of the debates of his era. The content and structure of Ratzinger’s thesis, and the critics of his argument and conclusions, are not directly relevant to this present article. This section addresses two questions: Did Bonaventure’s thought and its structure influence Josef Ratzinger? What influence on the concept of human ecology might we discern?

As Pope Benedict XVI, he did not speak of any direct influence of Bonaventure on his philosophy or theology of creation. However, he did give three audiences, or informal presentations, on Bonaventure and the Franciscans on successive weeks in 2010:

1. “Today I would like to talk about St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. I confide to you that in broaching this subject I feel a certain nostalgia, for I am thinking back to my research as a young scholar on this author who was particularly dear to me. My knowledge of him had quite an impact on my formation” (Benedict XVI 2010b).
2. “...[A]mong St Bonaventure's various merits was the ability to interpret authentically and faithfully St Francis of Assisi, whom he venerated and studied with deep love” (Benedict XVI 2010c).
3. “I would like to study with you some other aspects of the doctrine of St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. He is an eminent theologian who deserves to be set beside another great thinker, a contemporary of his, St. Thomas Aquinas” (Benedict XVI 2010d).

Pope Benedict spoke quite eloquently of the philosophical and theological foundations that can support an authentic dialogue between faith and reason, theology and science. At a 2008 presentation to scientists, he deployed several metaphors and images that had been used by Bonaventure:

The imagery of nature as a book has its roots in Christianity and has been held dear by many scientists... It is a book whose history, whose evolution, whose “writing” and meaning, we “read” according to the different approaches of the sciences, while all the time presupposing the foundational presence of the author who has wished to reveal himself therein. This image also helps us to understand that the world, far from originating out of chaos, resembles an ordered book; it is a cosmos. ... We may not at first be able to see the harmony both of the whole and of the relations of the individual parts, or their relationship to the whole. Yet, there always remains a broad range of intelligible events, and the process is rational in that it reveals an order of evident correspondences and undeniable finalities... And thanks to the natural sciences we have greatly increased our understanding of the uniqueness of humanity’s place in the cosmos (Benedict XVI 2008). This address is significant in three ways. It deploys some of the same metaphors for creation and its attributes (book, reading, harmony) as Bonaventure. It conveys a metaphysics consistent with
that of Bonaventure, for creation, by disclosing God’s purpose for all reality, is communicative. A semiotic metaphysics provides the possibility of creation bearing God’s message. Third, it articulates an integral relation of the parts and whole, and in this sense, it echoes Bonaventure wisdom theology.

Conclusion: Franciscan Wisdom Opens Up Meanings of Human Ecology

Pope Benedict has a very positive understanding of science, as the quote above demonstrates. Elsewhere he and his predecessor spoke of the importance of a constructive dialogue between theology and science (Russell et al. 1990). Both Pope John Paul and Benedict, however, used the modern word “ecology” to communicate a philosophical understanding of creation -- including humanity -- that is rooted deep within the Catholic tradition.

Ecology is the scientific study of the relationships that living organisms have with each other and their environment. It undermines the reductionistic tendencies in current technoscientific thought common in our culture. Strictly speaking, it is scientific discipline, a field of the life sciences. However, ecology has been called the “subversive science” because it asserts that all of nature is related. Ecology has contributed a revolutionary concept, the ecosystem, even though it points to an ancient insight. An ecosystem is “a functional system of complementary relations between living organisms and their environment, delimited by arbitrarily chosen boundaries, which in space and time appear to maintain a steady yet dynamic equilibrium. An ecosystem thus has physical parts with particular relationships -- the structure of the system -- that together take part in dynamic processes -- the function of the system” (Gliessman 1998, 17; emphasis original). The term “appear” is important, because in fact, no functional systems in nature actually maintain equilibrium indefinitely.

The modifier “human” in the expression “human ecology” is necessary to communicate that human beings are a part of nature or creation, a fact that seems, curiously, to be frequently forgotten by many scientists, and in some cases religious leaders. The evidence presented in this essay suggests that Pope Benedict uses “human ecology,” very much in the spirit of Bonaventure’s thought, to communicate the essentially relational character of God and of all metaphysical reality. God is essentially relational, and therefore God’s cosmos is too. Here the metaphor of the circle indicates that essential reality. Perhaps Bonaventure’s circle metaphor can help us engage the essential relationally character of life proposed by the ecosystem concept.

This chapter has traced elements in Bonaventure’s wisdom theology that Pope Benedict deployed, even though he did not cite his work. Here we might consider that Bonaventure’s thought may have influenced Josef Ratzinger, in a broader sense, as many elements of his religious philosophy of creation were broadly shared across much of Catholic history. The Catholic tradition has long held that understanding creation helps us understand God. This is expressed by the Old Testament, and more fully developed by Augustine. Bonaventure merely built upon this tradition (Hayes 2001). By understanding scientific ecology, we can better read the book of nature. Pope Benedict’s teachings challenge us to engage contemporary concerns and ways of thinking, but while simultaneously drawing on the full array of philosophical, intellectual and theological resources in our big, broad, dynamic Catholic tradition.

To return to the original question: US Catholics, of all kinds, have ignored “human ecology” as an expression. It is scarcely used. Why is this? The answer lies in part due to our ignorance of the wisdom in our Catholic tradition. The presentation of creation by Bonaventure, and Pope Benedict, may appear novel to contemporary Christian streams of thought, but in reality, it is deeply traditional. For us today, Bonaventure’s work challenges us to consider the breadth, diversity, and wisdom in our Catholic tradition. As a doctor of the church, he offers us
many valuable teachings about creation and its role in salvation history -- teachings that have been lost or forgotten. We are inheritors to an impressive, coherent, attractive understanding of God’s love expressed to us through creation. This discussion suggests the following tasks for the US Catholic Church:

1. Recover the breadth of Catholic philosophy as wisdom tradition grounded in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and the Holy Trinity. To take full advantage of the expression “human ecology” we should ground this in our Catholic philosophical tradition, including cosmology and metaphysics. This is a more robust position from which to dialogue with contemporary culture and science.

2. Propose human ecology as a broad, positive framework to guide us in taking our appropriate place in and as a part of creation, drawing from our tradition of Trinitarian theology, common good, and shared vocation of humanity.

3. Draw from the Franciscan intellectual tradition that integrates affective inquiry and social engagement. Knowledge alone is not adequate to guide the human to a balanced relationship with creation, nor to the sense of religious purpose God intends for all created reality (Warner 2012). Bonaventure’s philosophy can inform our efforts to integrate love and praxis with knowledge, and to enhance the integrity of our witness to God’s love for all creation and our human duties to respond in kind.

Pope Benedict’s use of “human ecology” challenges us to simultaneously engage contemporary concerns and ways of thinking, but they challenge us to do so while drawing on the full array of philosophical, intellectual and theological resources in our big, broad, dynamic Catholic tradition. I am not suggesting that the St. Francis Pledge be replaced by the St. Bonaventure Pledge; however, I do think that we who attempt to interpret and extend Pope Benedict’s teaching about human ecology and climate protection can draw wisdom and inspiration from Bonaventure’s wisdom.

References


1 The generous support of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University made participation in the conference and this publication possible.

2 The *habilitationsschrift* is a post-doctoral research project (usually a scholarly book) used by European academic institutions to evaluate the candidacy for a senior professorship. Ratzinger completed his in 1959, and it was first published in English in 1971.
3 Much scholarship of the Franciscan movement emphasized tension and discontinuity between the primitive and intellectual expressions of the Franciscan movement; more recent work emphasizes continuity through institutionalization. Two examples of the former are Desbonnets (1988) and Landini (1968). Two examples of the latter are Cousins (1981) and Blastic (1998).

4 The best edition is Bonaventure (2002). The notes on translation and references to other components of Bonaventure’s corpus are particularly helpful. Another fine version can be found in Cousins (1978).

5 The literature on Bonaventure’s understanding of Trinity is extensive. Some examples include: Hayes (1994), Delio (2001), and Cullen (2006). Bonaventure’s theology of the Trinity was also influenced by John Damascene, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Richard of St. Victor. See Hayes (1992).

6 For a personal narrative of his motivations for and struggles with his *habilitationsschrift*, see pages 105-114 in Ratzinger (1998).

7 For a review of the critical responses to Ratzinger’s discussion of Bonaventure’s apocalypticism, see Cullen (2006), 177-186.