**Pope Francis and the Challenge of Sustainability**

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**Overview**

In recent months, attention to the religious contributions to environmental debate has intensified in anticipation of Pope Francis’ encyclical on ecology, expected for release early this summer. I have never seen so much attention paid to a papal encyclical prior to its release. Some of this attention, quite frankly, troubles me as it seems that many are seeking to politicize and use the encyclical to advance law and public policy positions without actually seeing the words that the encyclical contains. It also seems to be attention that is premature, as it is still unclear whether and to what extent the encyclical will be a theological reflection vs a public policy statement. My hope is probably in the minority -- I hope that it will be the former. It has been my observation that the latter tends to become dated more quickly and sacrifices timelessness for the sake of being more timely. I believe that the most important contribution that the Church can make to these discussions is the presentation of a broad ethical framework of rights and responsibilities and an approach to linking environmental concerns to the myriad of other important areas of ethical and social concern that face our modern world.

From the moment he was introduced as Pope Francis, a name forever linked to the poverello of Assisi, the patron saint of ecology, Jorge Bergolio’s thoughts and teaching on ecological matters have been a topic of intense scrutiny and worldwide interest, culminating this summer in the release of his encyclical. This will be an important document in that it brings together many years of Catholic teaching and it will do so at the level of an encyclical – a more formal level than prior pronouncements on the topic.

It is also significant because of its timing -- it will be released at the time of politically fractious conversations on these issues and merely months before a papal visit to the United States in which Pope Francis is scheduled to visit with the President, address a Joint Session of Congress, and speak to the United Nations Assembly. The content of these addresses and discussions has, of course, not been revealed but it is likely that ecological issues will come up. Of course, the COP will be taking place this December in Paris; thus, this encyclical has also taken on some additional significance in the run-up to that meeting.

However, in spite of the great degree of attention being paid, prospectively, to Pope Francis’s encyclical, it does not exist in a vacuum, nor is it the first time that a pope has spoken at length on matters of responsible stewardship. Rather, formal letters on the topic have been written by Pope Paul VI, Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI who, unknown to many, was often dubbed “the green pope” due to the richness of his theological attention to this question. Given the great interest in Pope Francis’ encyclical, this presentation will offer a general overview of the Catholic tradition of environmental stewardship, address the major documents written by the last 3 Popes to speak of this issue, and then offer some reflections on what I believe Pope Francis’ upcoming statement may contribute to the discussion.

**Selected Sources: Papal Documents on Ecology**

Pope Paul VI, Pope Saint John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI have all written about ecological matters. The most significant documents linked to each of them can be found at the following links:

Blessed Pope Paul VI

*A Hospitable Earth for Future Generations: Message to the Stockholm Conference on Human Environment* (June 1, 19720 (available at <http://conservation.catholic.org/paul%20vi.htm>)

Pope Saint John Paul II

*Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation* (Jan. 1, 1990) (available at

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html_>

Pope Benedict XVI

*Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (Jan. 1, 2010) (available at <http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html>)

Pope Francis

The official website for Vatican documents is vatican.va. This is where the official version of Pope Benedict’s ecology encyclical will be available (in multiple official translations) when it is released.

**Selected Sources: Background Readings**

I have previously written some background materials on Catholic social thought and ecology. The footnotes in the following articles will point interested readers to additional sources in the tradition beyond the major documents highlighted above:

[The Call to Stewardship: A Catholic Perspective on Environmental Responsibility](http://ssrn.com/abstract=2594783) | [Show Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#show2594783) [Hide Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#hide2594783) | [Download This Paper](javascript:void(0);) |   
Chapter 17 of American Law from a Catholic Perspective, Edited by Ronald J. Rychlak, 2015, CUA Columbus School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2015-2

[Environmental Ethics from the Perspective of NEPA and Catholic Social Teaching: Ecological Guidance for the 21st Century](http://ssrn.com/abstract=1559091) | [Show Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#show1559091) [Hide Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#hide1559091) | [Download This Paper](javascript:void(0);) |   
William & Mary Environmental Law and Policy Review, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2004, CUA Columbus School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2010-17

[The 'Preferential Option for the Poor': An Opportunity and a Challenge for Environmental Decision-Making](http://ssrn.com/abstract=1441935) | [Show Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#show1441935) [Hide Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#hide1441935) | [Download This Paper](javascript:void(0);) |   
University of St. Thomas Law Journal, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2008, CUA Columbus School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2009-7

[Discerning the Environmental Perspective of Pope Benedict XVI](http://ssrn.com/abstract=1559086) | [Show Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#show1559086) [Hide Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#hide1559086) | [Download This Paper](javascript:void(0);) |   
Journal of Catholic Social Thought, Vol. 4, pp. 227-269, 2007, CUA Columbus School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2010-14

[After Copenhagen, Some Lessons from Rome](http://ssrn.com/abstract=1594797) | [Show Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#show1594797) [Hide Abstract](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cf_dev/AbsByAuth.cfm?per_id=625430#hide1594797) | [Download This Paper](javascript:void(0);) |   
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