

Christian Humanism, Anthropocentrism, and the Contemporary Ecological Crisis

by Anthony Le Duc

Environmental degradation and the impending ecological crisis is one of the greatest concerns of the Catholic Church. Nowadays, speaking out about and acting to raise environmental awareness, promote ecological sustainability, and advocate species conservation are no longer considered activities belonging to the so-called “hippy tree-hugging vegetarian liberal” but the preoccupation of modern society in general as well as all parts of the Catholic Church in particular. Church leaders and theologians over the decades have tried hard to put forth an environmentalism solidly based on Biblical scholarship and Church teachings, especially ever since Lynn White Jr. described in his seminal essay five decades ago that the Judeo-Christian tradition was the most anthropocentric religion that ever existed and blamed it for the ecological crisis.¹ This charge, whether reasonable or not, was a blow for Christianity because White’s position was readily accepted by many environmental ethicists and repeated by generations of activists. Even now it is still difficult for Christianity to completely shake off this characterization. Misperceptions of the Catholic Church’s teachings on the ecology persist in part due to widespread actions

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of Catholics themselves that go against these very teachings. However, there is also a fundamental problem of misunderstanding the Catholic ecological stance that bases itself on the tradition of Christian humanism, which recent generations of popes have continually reiterated in various Church documents that refer to social concerns, ecology being one of them. The purpose of this essay is to shed light on Catholic environmentalism in context of the Catholic humanistic outlook. It will demonstrate that Catholic environmentalism based on Christian humanism neither fits the characterization of anthropocentrism as understood by White nor agrees with the positions that call for non-anthropocentric environmentalisms such as Deep Ecology and biocentrism. Rather, Catholic environmentalism is derived from a humanism that highlights the noble calling of the human person to strive towards a life of virtue and to be agents who not only live in but work towards achieving

harmony within humanity and with the entire cosmos.

The Nature of Christian Humanism

The second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyons said, “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” The basis for Irenaeus’s sentiment can be found in the Gospel, for it was Jesus himself who declared that his purpose for coming into the world was so that humanity “may have life, and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). These statements highlight

¹ Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205.

the aim of Christian humanism, which is to make God's glory seen and felt by humanity being fully and truly itself as intended by its Creator. What needs to be explicated is what does it mean for human beings to be truly and fully themselves? How is it manifested in human attitudes, and with behavior and relationship with God, with fellow human beings, and with all of creation? In order to answer these questions, it is important to briefly explain the difference between the term humanism as understood by Catholic thinkers over the centuries and that as appropriated by the Enlightenment project. What came to be called humanism is a notion that long precedes the free thought ideology which interprets the human condition through a rationalist, secularist, and naturalist worldview. This restrictive use of the term humanism is in fact a rather recent development, and certainly not an invention of the secular humanist movement, as accurately observed by the humanist Nicolas Walter:

The facts are that, while *humanism* happens to be the word we now use, it isn't "our own"; that it has been, is being, and will be used by many other people in many other ways; that most of its senses have actually involved religion; that many of its nonreligious senses are unclear without qualification; that all viable senses of a word are equally valid; that semantic dogmatism and verbal authoritarianism are quite alien to what most of us understand by being humanist or supporting humanism; that words can't be "stolen"; and that neither we nor anyone else could control the words even if we wished to.²

The term humanism has its roots in the Latin term *humanitas*, which designates human nature as something civilized and cultivated as opposed to being barbaric.³ A humanist, as it was used in the Middle Ages in Europe when the term came into existence, was someone who benefitted from an education comprising of language and literature, and who continued to work in these areas as a scholar and teacher.⁴ Such a person would be characterized by moral and social integrity manifesting the fullness of what it meant to be human.⁵ When the word humanist appeared in English in the sixteenth century, it was still employed to refer to someone who was a practiced grammarian or rhetorician, or someone who was devoted to studying human affairs. Though humanism had a pedagogical emphasis, it was always developed within a greater Christian context which presumed faith in God. It was not until the late nineteenth century that humanism began to take on an anti-religious connotation depicting human beings as rational creatures independent of theological considerations.⁶ This modification is judged by Walter, however, to be "applied retrospectively and indeed anachronistically and unhistorically."⁷ In the years after, philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach and Arnold Ruge continued the process of expunging Christian elements out of humanism so that humanism itself became its own religion—a religious alternative to Christianity. Despite the movement to replace faith in God with faith in humanity as inspired by Auguste Comte's anti-theistic positivism, humanism continued to be referred to in religious overtones. It was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that humanism made a divorce from religion all together as reflected in educationalist Harold Blackham's declaration that humanism is an "alternative to religion." Humanism, asserted Blackham, proceeds "from the assumptions that man is on his own and this life is all and as assumption of responsibility for one's life and for the life of mankind."⁸ While this understanding of humanism gained popularity in a particular circle of thinkers, the term continued to be connected to all sorts of disciplines: religious, scientific, secular, ethical, rationalist, spiritual, civic, etc. Catholic thinkers throughout history and up until the modern age continued to insist on a humanism rooted

2 Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), Kindle edition.

3 Angus Ritchie and Nick Spencer, *The Case for Christian Humanism: Why Christians Should Believe in Humanism, and Humanists in Christianity* (London: Theos, 2014), 15.

4 Walter, *Humanism*.

5 John W. O'Malley, "How Humanistic is the Jesuit Tradition? From the 1599 Ratio Studiorum to Now," in *Jesuit Education 21: Conference Proceedings on the Future of Jesuit Higher Education*, ed. Martin R. Tripole (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 2000), 1.

6 Ritchie and Spencer, *Case for Christian Humanism*, 17.

7 Walter, *Humanism*.

8 Quoted in Ritchie and Spencer, *Case for Christian Humanism*, 20.

in religion and faith in God and modeled on the person of Jesus Christ. Christian humanism maintained its own place of importance as reflected in the vibrant teachings of the Church up until the present.

Humanism, despite the attempt by some to depict it as an ideology wholly and necessarily free of any spiritual or religious dimensions, in fact does not represent a vision of life that departs from that of Christianity. However, in the Catholic context, it bears little resemblance to the humanism that insists on putting faith in humanity rather than in God. Although modern humanism has its origins in the Renaissance Era, Christian humanism can be traced back to Christianity's early days with a legacy that is long and varied.⁹ Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose, Augustine of Hippo, and Jerome represented some of the most learned men of their times, and their writings became resources for developing humanistic education. Augustine's *De Doctrina Catholica* as well as his rhetorical skills were of tremendous inspiration to the medieval education,¹⁰ which made part of its agenda the recovery of the ancient Christian tradition, both Greek and Latin.¹¹ Christian humanism continued to be advocated in modern times as represented by the philosophy of Jacques Maritain, who insisted that Christian humanism served to develop the complete human person by not rejecting the spiritual dimension of life and "sets no a priori limit to the descent of the divine into man."¹² This anthropological outlook where human beings avail themselves to the divine and the super-rational distinguishes Christian humanism from what Maritain labeled "anthropocentric humanism" where human beings become their "own centre, and therefore the centre of all things."¹³ In addition, it leads to the "discovery of a deeper and fuller sense of the dignity of the human person, so that man would re-find himself in God refound, and would direct social work toward an heroic ideal of brotherly love."¹⁴ Maritain's integral humanism finds continuity and resonance in the ethical personalism of Louis Janssens who declared that the person is a complex totality whose value as a person is realized in the very act of living life.¹⁵ Rather than being an individual whose existence is isolated from everything else in space and time, the person comprised of both physical and spiritual components is able to direct him/herself towards God and others in free, loving, co-operative and reciprocal relationships. Therefore, self-actualization or true personhood is achieved in the process of encountering with others in mutual dependency rather than domination or instrumentalization of the other.

The thoughts of Maritain and Janssens no doubt had their impact on the Catholic Church, whose vision of Christian humanism made its appearance in one of the most important documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*. In the Church's articulation, Christian humanism is integrally connected to the person of Christ who restored to humanity all that was lost through the sins of Adam.

Christ, the final Adam, reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. He who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15) is himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness that had been disfigured by sin. Human nature, assumed by him, was not annulled

9 William Schweiker, "Humanity Before God: Theological Humanism from a Catholic Perspective," Martin Marty Center Web Forum, 2003, accessed August 28, 2017, <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/pdfs/webforum/102003/Schweiker%20essay.pdf>, 1.

10 Schweiker, "Humanity Before God," 2.

11 Alistair Hamilton, "Humanism and the Bible," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, ed. Jill Kraye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101.

12 Jacques Maritain, "Integral Humanism and the Crisis of Modern Times," *The Review of Politics*, 1, no.1 (1939): 8. Maritain describes this Christian humanism as "integral humanism," which "considers man in the wholeness of his natural and supernatural being."

13 Jacques Maritain, *True Humanism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 19.

14 Maritain, "Integral Humanism," 7-8.

15 Louis Janssens, *Personne et Société: Théories actuelles et essai doctrinal* (Gembloux: Ducolot, 1939), 3.

but was raised to a divine dignity. The Son of God, by his Incarnation, was united to every man. Born of the Virgin, he was made one of us, like us in all things except sin.¹⁶

Therefore, human moral, social, and spiritual development must be measured against the person of Christ who represents perfection in all these respects. Through the status of the Incarnated Christ, human beings no longer need to focus on sinfulness or lament human brokenness but can look towards a higher destiny made possible through this extraordinary event in human history. Christ's incarnation also made possible for human beings to be united to God who created humanity and wills that all people constitute one family.¹⁷ If human beings are aware of the extraordinary gift to them in Jesus Christ, they will come to understand that a fully realized human destiny can only come from each person being "a sincere gift of himself."¹⁸ Therefore, Christian humanism is defined by "spiritual and moral maturity of the human race" and characterized "by responsibility to his brothers and to history."¹⁹ The Council Fathers insisted that Christ himself "can offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny."²⁰

The centrality of Christ in Christian humanism envisioned by the Second Vatican Council has further been affirmed by successive generations of popes up until the present. Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* declared that only when integral human development is directed to Christ can it "promote the good of every man and of the whole man."²¹ Paul VI wrote, "By reason of his union with Christ, the source of life, man attains to new fulfillment of himself, to a transcendent humanism which gives him his greatest possible perfection: this is the highest goal of personal development."²² Likewise, in the first encyclical of Pope John Paul II's pontificate, *Redemptor Hominis*, he also insisted that authentic humanism must be connected to Christ and the redemptive act accomplished in the cross, death, and resurrection of Christ.²³ When this link that Christ forged through the paschal mystery is broken, not only do human beings suffer, but so does the entire creation. Human progress disavowed of Christ, according to John Paul II, only leads to futility characterized by environmental destruction, armed conflicts, and utter disregard for life.²⁴ On the other hand, union with Christ the Redeemer helps human beings to overcome the effects of sin, imbue the heart with fullness of justice, and make manifest the noble dimensions of human nature.²⁵

Like *Gaudium et Spes*, John Paul II recognized and affirmed the ethical thrust contained in a Christ-centered humanism, which manifests itself in humble service. While the Christian vocation is described as "kingly" because it shares in Christ's own kingly mission, this kingly vocation does not support the exercise of arrogance and domination, but a sincere imitation of Christ who "came not to be served but to serve." For John Paul II, authentic kingship is derived from the self-mastery through personal development of virtue and spiritual maturity manifested in true servanthood. The combination of kingship and servanthood gives rise to the principle of "kingly service" which "imposes on each one of us, in imitation of Christ's example, the duty to demand of himself exactly what

16 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 22, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, para. 22.

17 GS, no. 24.

18 GS, no. 24.

19 GS, no. 55.

20 GS, no. 10.

21 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967), no. 14, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

22 PP, no. 16.

23 *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), no. 10, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis.html.

24 RH, no. 8.

25 RH, no. 9.

we have been called to do, what we have personally obliged ourselves to by God's grace, in order to respond to our vocation."²⁶ John Paul II's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, condemned any humanism that stripped off the God dimension as "inhuman." He wrote in the conclusion of the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*:

*A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism. Only a humanism open to the Absolute can guide us in the promotion and building of forms of social and civic life—structures, institutions, culture and ethics—without exposing us to the risk of becoming ensnared by the fashions of the moment.*²⁷

Christian Humanism and the Ecology

The teachings of Council Fathers and generations of popes as well as influential Catholic thinkers make it clear that Christian humanism aims at achieving integral human development and a life of virtue for the sake of service of others. The focus on the human person in Christian humanism does not represent self-centered preoccupation with one's own fate and perfection while being completely blinded to the well-being and flourishing of others. With regards to ecological concerns, Christian humanism strives for mental and spiritual transformation needed to counter tendencies towards exploitation and misusing of power that lead to ecological degradation. From the Catholic humanistic standpoint, the ecological crisis is as much a concern about humanity as it is a concern about the ecology. Pope Benedict XVI argued that the ecological crisis reflects a defect in the "human ecology." When the human ecology is in disarray with weakening virtues, disrespect for life, and loss of conscience, the environmental ecology also suffers.²⁸ John Paul II identified this weakening state of human ecology as the "culture of death"²⁹ that destroys human life on the social level and is also manifested in the "irrational destruction of the environment."³⁰ For John Paul II, the culture of death undergirded by a "veritable structure of sin" not only takes on the form of lack of respect for human life in all its stages but also the lack of respect for nature as reflected in the "technical and scientific way of thinking, prevalent in present-day culture [that] rejects the very idea that there is a truth of creation which must be acknowledged, or a plan of God for life which must be respected."³¹ The lack of peace, in addition to resulting from regional conflicts, abortion, poverty, and the like, also came about due to plundering nature's resources.³² Similar to other social problems, the ecological crisis is a moral issue reflecting a disharmonious relationship between humanity and God. In his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II diagnosed the root cause of the ecological crisis as a widespread "anthropological error" plaguing human society.

Man, who discovers his capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through his own work, forgets that this is always based on God's prior and original gift of the things that are. Man thinks that he can make arbitrary use of the earth, subjecting it without restraint to his will, as though it did not have its own requisites and a prior God-given purpose, which man can indeed develop but must not betray. Instead of carrying out his role as a co-operator with God in the work of creation,

26 *RH*, no. 21.

27 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), no. 78, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html.

28 *CV*, no. 51.

29 John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), no.12, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.pdf.

30 *EV*, no. 38.

31 *EV*, no. 22.

32 John Paul II, "World Day of Peace Message 1990," https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.pdf.

man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, which is more tyrannized than governed by him.³³

Therefore, the effort to address the ecological crisis must proceed from the effort to “safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic ‘human ecology’” that enable human to “respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed” by God.³⁴ The principle of a sound human ecology that promotes human dignity was reaffirmed and extensively discussed by Pope Francis in his encyclical on the environment *Laudato Si*, demonstrating its inseparability from any discussion on the natural ecology. Francis wrote:

The destruction of the human environment is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement. Every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in ‘lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies.’ Authentic human development....presumes full respect for the human person, but it must also be concerned for the world around us and ‘take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system.’³⁵

What Christian humanism emphasizes as expressed by all the popes cited thus far is a need for approaching the development process in general and addressing the ecological crisis in particular with a more “integral and integrating vision,” taking into account both social and natural dimensions of reality.³⁶ A lack of “genuine and profound humanism” will ultimately render social, political, economic, and scientific mechanisms ineffective no matter how well thought out they may be.³⁷ It is not enough to coordinate and bring together various fields of knowledge without that effort being driven by a humanism that can grasp a more comprehensive vision of reality.

Catholic Humanistic Environmentalism and Anthropocentrism

Catholic environmentalism based on Christian humanism as presented here must not be confused with what environmental ethicists and activists often mischaracterize as anthropocentrism, especially the brand of anthropocentrism described as strong or tyrannical. The term anthropocentrism has been in existence for over 150 years since it was first coined in the 1860s in debates on Darwin’s theory of evolution to describe the prevailing historical assumption that human beings occupied the center of the universe.³⁸ Although the literal meaning of the term is “human-centeredness,” what this actually implies is vague and is left open to a variety of interpretation. The *Cambridge Online Dictionary* gives a single definition for “anthropocentric,” which is “considering humans and their existence as the most important and central fact in the universe.” The implication drawn from this definition is that human beings occupy ontological and moral priority over all other entities—both biotic and abiotic—in the universe. Anthropocentrism as an ontological view ensures that human beings, as the zenith of creation, are privileged when considerations are given to matters that affect their well-being and flourishing. Embracing this outlook is a small step away from the ethical view that human beings reserve the right to do with nature as they see fit, even if it means wanton exploitation, because only they are ascribed intrinsic value while all other entities possess only instrumental value. Values are accorded to the nonhuman world only when they directly or indirectly

33 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), no. 37, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

34 CA, no. 38.

35 Francis, *Laudato Si* (2015), no.5, https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si_en.pdf.

36 LS, no. 141.

37 LS, no. 181.

38 Elisa K. Campbell, “Beyond Anthropocentrism,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 19 (1983): 54-67.

serve human interests in some ways.³⁹ Consequently, when human interests conflict with those of nonhuman entities, priority is inevitably given to the former at the cost of the latter.

In addition to the ontological and ethical views of anthropocentrism, there is also a third view, which is often ignored when one refers to it in the ecological discourse. According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, anthropocentrism is the epistemological reality of “interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences.” This definition emphasizes not the attitude of human beings towards themselves or towards non-human entities, but the mere fact of human *locatedness* in the grand scheme of things. Eugene Hargrove remarked that epistemologically, anthropocentrism is unavoidable because the world can only be perceived through the human locatedness.⁴⁰ Frederic Ferré employed the term “perspectival anthropocentrism” to describe a reality in which humans “have no choice but to think as humans.”⁴¹ This is so “even while we try to transcend egoism by cultivating sympathy and concern for other centres of intrinsic value.”⁴² Indeed, human beings may try to imagine what it might be like to view the world through the eyes of a chimpanzee or a bird as a stimulating intellectual exercise or as a practice in enhancing human empathy towards non-human creatures, but ultimately, the only reference that human beings can be confident of is their own. Even with that there are plenty of disagreements because points of view among human beings often fail to coincide. Tim Hayward asserted that not only is anthropocentrism unavoidable and unobjectionable in certain respects, it is even desirable to “perform the critical function envisaged for it.”⁴³

The fact that there are multiple valences to anthropocentrism, both objectionable and unobjectionable, has led to alternative terminologies. Each tries to resolve the tension between a natural and inescapable reality of human beings as the subject of perceiving and valuing and the negative tendency of human beings to turn into despots ready to conquer, dominate, and subjugate nature at all costs. William Grey advocated an “enriched and enlightened” anthropocentrism in which a “short and narrow” conception of human interests and concerns ought not trump environmental balance. Grey claimed that “anthropocentrism is natural and inevitable, and when properly qualified turns out to be perfectly benign.”⁴⁴ The benign anthropocentrism advocated by Grey is similar to the concept of weak anthropocentrism proposed by Bryan Norton. For Norton, weak anthropocentrism entails that human beings attempt to control their decision-making process by carefully examining their felt and considered preferences, taking into account a world view derived from sound aesthetic and moral ideals, and sound scientific theories as well as a metaphysical framework that interprets these theories.⁴⁵ The implication in Norton’s use of the adjective “weak” is that there exists a strong anthropocentrism characterized by uncontrolled exploitation and destruction of nature to serve human interest, which is unacceptable and must be resisted.

Both the benign anthropocentrism of Grey and weak anthropocentrism of Norton serve to affirm the inevitability of human locatedness in the task of decision making in matters regarding the human future and the future of the ecology while rejecting potential abuse of powers when it comes to those futures. Scholars like Grey and Norton object to proponents of non-anthropocentric paradigms such as Deep Ecology that “often try to correct anthropocentric bias by developing and defending a conception of environmental value which downgrades or denies hu-

39 Katie McShane, “Anthropocentrism vs. Nonanthropocentrism: Why Should We Care?” *Environmental Values* 16 (2007): 170.

40 Eugene Hargrove, “Weak Anthropocentric Intrinsic Value,” in *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Roston III (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 175.

41 Frederic Ferré, “Personalistic Organicism: Paradox or Paradigm?” in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, ed. Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72.

42 Ferré, “Personalistic Organicism,” 72.

43 Tim Hayward, “Anthropocentrism: A Misunderstood Problem,” *Environmental Values* 6, no. 1 (1997), 51.

44 William Grey, “Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 4 (1993): 470.

45 Bryan G. Norton, “Environmental Ethics and Weak Anthropocentrism,” *Environmental Ethics* 6, no. 2 (1984): 134.

man values and concerns altogether, and in so doing renders them marginal or useless for decisions and action.”⁴⁶ According to Hayward, “If the ultimate point of an ethic is to yield a determinate guide to human action, then, the human reference is ineliminable even when extending moral concern to nonhumans.”⁴⁷ The agent can respond to the ethical obligation to make others’ ends his/her ends, but ultimately, asserts Hayward, “Values are always the values of the valuer.”⁴⁸

Hayward, Grey, and Norton all agree that the necessity of a human reference point makes it impossible to create a totally non-anthropocentric value system that has no basis in the human experience and existing human values. The notion that values can simply be recognized and selected without any need to refer to human interpretation is a delusion. Even the natural balance advocated by ecocentrism is a human perception of what balance ought to look like. One perspective of balance might be that human beings do not interfere in the workings of nature so that nothing is disturbed. Let whatever happen happens. If a virus invades a population of birds, the virus has as much right to flourish as the birds. The fact that the virus is winning the battle is simply part of the many dramas taking place in nature, which human beings can sit back and observe but have no role in determining the outcome. A second interpretation of balance might be that human beings use their intellectual ability and technological knowledge to “improve” the natural balance. For example, when a certain animal population is being invaded by a destructive pest, human beings should intervene to eliminate the culprit to restore the natural balance. A third interpretation of natural balance is that human beings, as natural entities in themselves, do what it is in their nature to do, and whatever results from that is considered entirely normal. If human beings end up destroying themselves along with present ecosystems, it would simply represent an event among the countless events in the ongoing life history of the planet. One billion years after human extinction, nature will still be nature, whatever that may look like. Depending on one’s perspective, any of these three and other possibilities can be argued as representing true natural balance. Nonetheless, the fact that one interpretation of “natural balance” will be preferred over the other signifies that there is a selection criterion of values that are meaningful to the human desire and experience. It is more reasonable and realistic to admit that what is deemed to be natural balance represents more of what human beings desire for themselves and for the world rather than to project human wishes onto nature and say that it is what nature “wants.” Mary Anne Warren commented:

We are not gods but human beings, reasoning about how we ought to think and act. Our moral theories can only be based upon what we know and what we care about, or ought to care about. If this makes our theories anthropocentric, then this much anthropocentrism is inevitable in any moral theory that is relevant to human actions.⁴⁹

The above discussion of Christian humanism and anthropocentrism demonstrates significant differences between Catholic humanistic environmentalism and anthropocentric environmentalism. It is clear that Catholic humanistic environmentalism resists the characterization as being anthropocentric in any strict sense of the word. First, it is not anthropocentric as an ontological view because while Catholic teaching affirms the nobleness of the human being in the order of creation, humanity is unceasingly reminded of how small a creature it is compared to God, the Creator. A person’s life is fragile like a flourishing flower that withers away under the scorching sun or falls away with the passing wind (Ps 103:15-16; Jb 14:2; 1 Pt. 1:24); that from dust he came, and to dust he will return (Gn 3:19; Eccl 3:20; Ps 103:14). With such merciless admonishments, anyone who stands before God and the world with a puffed-up chest is engaging in self-delusion and sooner or later will be destroyed by self implosion if he/she

46 William Grey, “Environmental Value and Anthropocentrism,” *Ethics and the Environment* 3, no. 1 (1998): 99.

47 Hayward, “Anthropocentrism,” 56.

48 Hayward, “Anthropocentrism,” 57.

49 Mary Anne Warren, *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 43.

were not already taken down by those who are stronger. The preventative measure against self-aggrandizement also means taking steps to thwart the ethical view that perceives the value of nonhuman entities as purely instrumental, having value only in so far as they are perceived by human beings to have value or remain useful to them. Catholic environmentalism challenges this thinking by stating that human beings have not been entrusted with the primary task of ascribing values to creatures—themselves included—because that task is the prerogative of God. In fact, the goodness (value) of all creatures has already been determined by God since the very moment of creation. This inalienable value was affirmed by various Church Fathers in their numerous writings.⁵⁰ In *Nature of the Good*, Augustine of Hippo pointed out that there are “generic good things to be found in all that God has created, whether spirit or body.” Thomas Aquinas likewise argued for the goodness of creatures because they have God as their ultimate source of existence. John Chrysostom, reflecting on Genesis 1, asserted that since God has already deemed each type of creature to be good, no one had the audacity and the arrogance to pronounce otherwise.⁵¹ Pope Francis echoed this sentiment when he declared, “Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures.”⁵² Modern anthropocentrism represents a misunderstanding on the part of human beings regarding the value and dignity of the world and their rightful relationship towards it, thus causing them to misuse and abuse God’s gift of creation.⁵³ Christian humanism not only sees this kind of anthropocentrism as misusing God’s gift of creation but also misusing the gift of human beings to each other, causing degeneration in social bonds and a breakdown in social harmony. Therefore, Christian humanism offers a corrective to the anthropological error that construes human-human and human-nature relationships in antagonistic and dominative terms. Just as human individuals and groups prove their strength and worth by subjugating and dominating the weaker members of the human family, the entire human race tries to assert its superiority through exploiting creation rather than displaying caring and responsible stewardship. Social instability and ecological degradation result from actions inspired by antagonism rather than by good will and concern for the common good. “We cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships,” remarked Pope Francis.⁵⁴

Catholic humanistic environmentalism accepts the epistemological stance of anthropocentrism only partially because while Christian humanism calls for the rightful place of human beings in the order of creation as well as the role imposed upon human beings by virtue of assuming that very position, human knowledge is not purely a human construct but comes about also as a result of revelation from God. God is the true source of knowledge and origin of what is good. Therefore, human beings do not simply conjure things up based on their own intellectual capability but rely also on inspiration from God, who reveals to them how they ought to see and understand the world around them. While non-anthropocentric environmentalisms such as Deep Ecology and biocentrism degrade or marginalize human values and concerns, ultimately rendering human responsibility in the ecological crisis unnecessary, Christian humanism affirms both human role and responsibility in the ecological crisis with the understanding that “human beings cannot be expected to feel responsibility for the world unless, at the same time, their unique capacities of knowledge, will, freedom and responsibility are recognized and valued.”⁵⁵ However, this is not the same as simply accepting anthropocentrism as an inevitable epistemological reality as a number of environmental ethicists have advocated because the Catholic outlook also takes into account divine inspiration that allows human beings to grasp things beyond philosophical reasoning.

50 J. Schaeffer, “Valuing Earth Intrinsically and Instrumentally: A Theological Framework for Environmental Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 4 (2005): 783-814.

51 Schaeffer, “Valuing Earth Intrinsically,” 787.

52 *LS*, no. 68.

53 *LS*, no. 115.

54 *LS*, no. 119.

55 *LS*, no. 118.

Anthropocentric environmentalisms (as well as the non-anthropocentric anti-thesis) cannot be equated with Catholic humanistic environmentalism because they employ a two-term metaphysics that often pitch human beings and nature in antagonistic relationships. In this predicament, either human beings control nature and exercise the right to do with nature as they see fit, or human beings are subject to nature as a mere node on the gigantic tree of existence. Neither option seems enticing considering how human beings understand and perceive themselves as subjects of value and responsibility. Unlike anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric environmentalisms, Catholic humanistic environmentalism employs a three-term metaphysics that places both human beings and nature under the guidance of God, directing and enabling for mutual and reciprocal relationship between God's creatures as well as between God and God's own creation. In this manner, Catholic humanistic environmentalism calls for an ethics of ecological stewardship that rejects tendencies towards exploitation and wanton destruction of nature. Numerous Biblical scholars have declared that any attempt to resort to the Genesis command to subjugate and dominate (Gn 1:28) to justify absolute domination is a gross misinterpretation of the intent of the Biblical writer and the will of God. Both Pope Francis and the Patriarch Bartholemew have called on Catholics who treat creation in this manner to confess their environmental sins because these actions represent violation of God's laws. For Pope Francis sin is manifested not only in acts of wars, violence, and abuse and ill treatment of the weak, but also in the "attacks on nature."⁵⁶ Ultimately, what Christian humanism attempts to do is to help human beings develop a spirituality grounded in their relationship with Christ, the Redeemer of Humankind, the revealer of human potential, the measure of human perfection, which ultimately affects their relationship with God, with each other, and, in fact, with the whole of creation. The environmentalism inspired by the personalist ethics of prominent Catholic thinkers like Maritain and Janssens asserts that unconcern for the ecology betrays authentic personhood and is detrimental to one's aim towards achieving full humanity or sustaining its dignity and value. In other words, care for creation is part and parcel of an authentic humanistic outlook that recognizes the necessity of living out all the different relationships in one's life in mutual dependency and with genuine love. Catholic humanistic environmentalism is a natural expression of this all-encompassing approach towards relationship building that aims at achieving social harmony as well as personal and ecological well-being.

Conclusion

As the Catholic Church continues to join with other Christian denominations, religious traditions, and secular fields in the ongoing effort to address the ecological crisis, it needs to present profound insights found within the tradition of Christian humanism to enrich the dialogue and clarify persistent misunderstanding of the Church's ecological outlook. An important aim is to end the unjustified depiction of Christian environmentalism in general and Catholic environmentalism in particular as being anthropocentric. The above discussion demonstrates that Catholic humanistic environmentalism rejects any view that places human beings in the position of absolute domination over non-human entities, constructs human-nature relationship in antagonistic terms, or takes an epistemological stance devoid of divine inspiration. As such, Catholic humanistic environmentalism neither endorses strong or tyrannical anthropocentrism which is outright detrimental to the ecology nor simply accepts the inevitable reality of human-locatedness which is potentially environmentally destructive if considerations are not given to the transcendent source of knowledge that informs human perception. Catholic humanistic environmentalism calls for the continuing development of the human person to truly become himself or herself in such way that reflects Christ in how he/she relates to God and to others. In this manner, any humanistic environmentalism must affirm that care for creation, just as care for fellow human beings, is essential to the process of fulfilling the destiny of being truly human, to live not simply as individuals, but as persons in the world. A person fully alive is able to recognize God as the Creator and Christ as the Redeemer, is ready to address the sun as brother and moon as sister, and is joyful to join with all of creation in praise of God as Father and Mother.

⁵⁶ *LS*, no. 66.