

MAREK FIAŁKOWSKI, O.F.M.CONV.

PROTECTION OF THE WORK OF CREATION. ECOLOGY IN THE TEACHINGS OF BENEDICT XVI

A b s t r a c t. The Church after the Second Vatican Council joined the discussion concerning natural environment, treating ecological issues as a sign of the times. The teachings of Benedict XVI concerning ecology fit the teaching of the Church after the Second Vatican Council, continuing and developing some of its elements and pointing towards new perspectives. This article aims at addressing key ecological issues presented in the teachings of the Pope, focusing on three areas: ecology of man, ecology of the family and ecology of peace. Benedict XVI combines the issues of the protection of nature with humanity and its condition, and with the need to build good social relations vital for both keeping the balance between people and maintaining and protecting peace.

Key words: environmental protection; the Church and ecology; Benedict XVI; ecology of man; ecology of the family; ecology of peace.

The Church after the Second Vatican Council joined the discussion concerning natural environment, treating ecological issues as a sign of the times.¹ The issue of ecology has been already raised by popes, including Paul VI (1963-1978),² and John Paul II (1978-2005).³ It was also the case during the

MAREK FIAŁKOWSKI, PhD, OFMConv – professor of the Catholic University of Lublin; the head of the Chair of Pastoral Theology at the Institute of Pastoral Theology and Catechetics in the Faculty of Theology; John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; address for correspondence: Al. Racławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin; e-mail: jdzskot@kul.lublin.pl

¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, “*Redemptor Hominis*” on the *Redemption for Humanity*, sec. 15 (Poznań: Pallottinum, 1979); JOHN PAUL II, “*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*” on the 20th Anniversary of “*Populorum Progressio*,” sec. 26 (Wrocław: TUM, 1988); Cf. Marek FIAŁKOWSKI, “Ekologia,” in *Leksykon teologii pastoralnej*, ed. Ryszard Kamiński et al. (Lublin: TN KUL, 2006), 235-7.

² Cf. Bolesław SZKLARCZYK, “Paweł VI i Stolica Apostolska o ochronie środowiska,” *Materiały Problemowe*, 12(1978), 4: 94-103; Michał WYROSTKIEWICZ, “Kwestia ekologiczna w wypowiedziach Magisterium Ecclesiae,” in *Kościół w życiu publicznym. Teologia polska i europejska*

short pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005-2013). It is quite telling especially in the light of unfavourable comments in the wake of Joseph Ratzinger's election, foreseeing an ecclesial counterrevolution and revocation of the Second Vatican Council reforms. Contrary to these comments, Benedict XVI has been named "the green pope,"⁴ and in June 2013 he received the *Acqui Ambiente* award, one of the most prestigious literary awards in the field of ecology.⁵

It seems that the ecological issues addressed by Benedict XVI can be divided into three areas: ecology of man, ecology of the family, ecology of peace. The pope builds on the achievements of his predecessors, but also brings in new elements to the topic.

1. ECOLOGY OF MAN

Pope Benedict XVI, reminding the Church of Her responsibility for all living creation, highlighted the fact that the Church should publicly protect not only the earth, water and wind, but, first and foremost, it should protect human beings from destroying each other. The pope stresses the importance of "some sort of ecology of the man, understood in an appropriate way."⁶ Thus, he alluded to the teachings of John Paul II, who was aware of the dangers resulting from the destruction of the natural and human environment. John Paul II claimed that too little attention was paid to "the protection of moral conditions of the real *ecology of the man*."⁷ According to

wobec nowych wyzwań, vol. 3: *Dyskusje, komunikaty, uzupełnienia, dokumenty końcowe*, ed. Krzysztof Gózdź et al. (Lublin: Wyd. KUL, 2004), 225-38.

³ Maria FILIPIAK, "O ochronie życia i środowiska naturalnego. Bibliografia wypowiedzi Jana Pawła II 1978-1993," *Ethos* 7(1994), 1-2: 325-32; Antoni SKOWROŃSKI, "'Kwestia ekologiczna' w nauczaniu Jana Pawła II," in *Ochrona środowiska w filozofii i teologii*, ed. Józef M. Dołęga and Józef W. Czartoszewski (Warszawa: ATK, 1999), 284-7.

⁴ Some foreign media hailed Benedict XVI "green pope". Cf. Kasper JAKUBOWSKI, "Czy Papieżowi Benedyktowi XVI jest po drodze z dzisiejszym ruchem 'Zielonych'?", *Święto stworzenia* Website, accessed December 22, 2015, <http://www.swietostworzenia.pl/czytelnia/22-wypowiedzi-kosciola/ekologia-benedykta-xvi/149-benedykt-xvi-zielonym-papiezem>.

⁵ The retired Pope was awarded for the anthology of his texts published in 2012 by Vatican Publishing House, titled: *Ecologia dell'uomo*. Cf. "Benedykt XVI nagrodzony za obronę środowiska naturalnego," KAI, accessed February 20, 2017, <https://ekai.pl/Benedict-xvi-nagrodzony-za-obrone-srodowiska-naturalnego/>.

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate. On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*, sec. 51 (Kraków: Wyd. M, 2009).

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 38 (Wrocław: Wyd. TUM, 1991).

Benedict XVI, each disrespectful and dismissive attitude towards environment is harmful to human life, and as long as the society respects “human ecology,” the natural environment can only benefit from it.⁸

The faithful can perceive nature as God’s creation, of which they can make good use, both in a material and spiritual sense. As long as nature and the man are seen merely as products of chance and evolutionary determinism, the collective awareness of taking responsibility for the earth, humanity and future generations wanes. Benedict XVI claims that this can lead to two bipolar attitudes: of treating nature as an untouchable taboo and of a ruthless exploitation of nature. Both attitudes go contrary to the Christian view of nature, which is understood as God’s act of creation, love and the truth. According to the Pope, nature precedes man and is given to him as a habitat. It is at our disposal but not as “a heap of scattered refuse,” but as a gift from the Creator, who defined its rights and offered it to man, to work it and to take care of it (Gen 2:15).⁹

Benedict XVI teaches us that nature is not more important than human beings. Were it not so, such an approach could lead to a birth of neo-paganism or pantheism. An extreme counter-approach is also unacceptable, as it would lead to the dehumanisation of nature and it being subject to exploitations and egoistical whims. Today, nature is regarded as something that can be exploited, even though it is God’s creation. Man lacks humility which helps to acknowledge nature as God’s gift that needs to be accepted and used according to God’s plan.¹⁰ It can be claimed that humanity respects God’s creation as long as it perceives life in it, otherwise, as Benedict XVI states, the humanity does nothing but disrespect itself and its environment. “Those who can recognise a reflection of the invisible Creator in the universe, are more capable of loving and more sensitive towards the symbolic value of living creatures.”¹¹

Treating nature in an instrumental way, bringing it down to the level of sheer numbers and figures, makes room for its exploitation, and, in consequence, for the justification of the disrespectful actions towards human

⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 51; BENEDICT XVI, *The Human Person, the Heart of Peace*, *L’Osservatore Romano* 28(2007), 2: 8.

⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 48.

¹⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Verbum Domini.” On The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, sec. 108 (Kraków: Wyd. M, 2010).

¹¹ BENEDICT XVI, “Environmental Protection as a Road to Peace. Homily Delivered during the Solemnity of Mary, the Holy Mother of God. 1.01. 2010,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 31(2010), 2: 16.

nature.¹² Alluding to the teachings offered by John Paul II, Benedict XVI reminds us that the way we treat the natural environment shapes the way we treat each other and *vice versa*. There is a strict correlation between respect for man and the environmental protection. “Responsibilities towards the environment stem from the responsibilities towards an individual and others.”¹³ The destruction of oneself leads to the destruction of the natural habitat. Similarly, when a given culture heads off towards nihilism, it is also nature that suffers.¹⁴ Benedict XVI claims that man and the environment interact with each other.¹⁵ Therefore, efforts should be made to educate the society when it comes to ecological awareness and responsibility, which should be based on the respect for man and his fundamental rights. It is also a call for humanity to verify and redefine their lifestyle.

In the face of the the natural environment degradation, a change in modern lifestyle is needed. Benedict XVI postulates that modern lifestyle, together with its consumerism model, should be abandoned as they threaten the natural environment, but also they do not bring any good from the economical point of view. It is focused on maximum gains and consumption, from an individual, egoistic perspective. This approach makes human beings valued only in the categories of their competitiveness.¹⁶ However, a true and genuine success can be only achieved through an act of giving, deriving from one’s intellectual capacities and enterprise, since development and growth hinges on selflessness, being a symbol of brotherhood and the logic of sharing.¹⁷ The Pope, in a conversation with Peter Seewald, talks about a poisoned thinking of the modern man, marked by an ill-conceived perspective. Salvation is offered only through conversion and acceptance of God’s will and God’s design towards man and nature.¹⁸

¹² BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 48.

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, “If You Want to Promote Peace, Protect God’s Creation. Benedict XVI’s Message for the World Day of Peace, 2010,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 31(2010), 1: 12.

¹⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, “Peace with God—Peace with All Creation. Message for the World Day of Peace, 1.01.1990,” in *Orędzia Ojca Świętego Jana Pawła II*, vol. 1, ed. Jacek Jękot and Piotr Słabek (Kraków: Wyd. M, 1998), 13; BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 51.

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, “Environmental Protection,” 16.

¹⁶ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, “Life Is a Quest for the Truth, Good and Beauty. Meeting with the Youth in Barangaro. 17.01.2008,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 29(2008), 9: 15-6.

¹⁷ BENEDICT XVI, “Blessed Are the Peacemakers. Message for the World Day of Peace. 1.01.2013,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 34(2013), 1: 5; cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 34 and 36.

¹⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times* (Kraków: Znak, 2011), 59.

What is needed, then, is a renewal of human mentality and adoption of a new lifestyle, where the quest for the truth, beauty, and goodness, as well as a need to strive for shared and true development and growth will be of essence, especially in the face of decisions concerning consumption, economy, and investment.¹⁹ An integral development of humanity, being driven by solidarity and justice, must account for future generations. God created the planet for the benefit of all humanity.²⁰ Destruction of the natural environment testifies to the short-sightedness of human policy and fixation on gain and benefit, burdening future generations and wreaking havoc to humanity and nature.²¹

The ecology of man combines the care for the natural environment with the care for human life, regardless of the stage of its development. Benedict XVI draws attention to the conflict which arises when the natural environment, instead of human life, is cared for. What should be protected is not only the earth, water and air but also human beings. Once the right to live and to die naturally is not respected and there are experiments carried out on human embryos, the human ecology is threatened and, in consequence, the natural environment suffers. It seems contradictory to make an appeal to respect and protect the natural environment, while the human being is not respected and protected. Benedict XVI points to the notion that the book of nature is one of its kind and it should not be divided when it comes to the environment, whether in the sphere of life, sexuality, marriage, family, social relations, or in other words, in the sphere of integral human development.²² A respect for the natural environment cannot neglect appraisal of the value of human life, regardless of its stage and condition. Any violation in this respect, especially at the very early stages, leads to irreversible damage done to the natural environment. “Respect for human beings and respect for nature are one and the same thing, but both can grow and be of an

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 36; BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 51; Cf. BENEDICT XVI, “If You Want to Promote Peace,” 11.

²⁰ II VATICAN COUNCIL, “Gaudium et Spes: the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” in *Konstytucje. Dekrety. Deklaracje. Tekst polski. Nowe tłumaczenie* (Poznań: Pallottinum, 2002), 69.

²¹ BENEDICT XVI, “If You Want to Promote Peace,” 7-8.

²² BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 51; BENEDICT XVI, “If You Want to Build Peace, Protect the Natural and Human Environment. Speech Delivered to the Diplomatic Corpus. 11.01.2010,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 31(2010), 2: 42; BENEDICT XVI, “Blessed are the Peacemakers,” sec. 4; cf. Włodzimierz FIJAŁKOWSKI, *Ekologia Rodziny—ekologiczna odnowa prokreacji* (Kraków: Rubikon, 2001).

appropriate measure, as long as we respect God and his Creation reflected in humanity.”²³

Benedict XVI teaches us that each human being has a nature, which should be respected and not manipulated for one’s own pleasure. No man is an island that will stand only on its own. Human beings are made of spirit, will and nature. Their will is justified when they listen to nature and respect it, and accept themselves the way they are. Only then can man be the full realisation of human freedom.²⁴

In the light of the abovementioned arguments, we can conclude that ecology of man is a concept describing the relationship between human beings and the natural environment, i.e. nature, society, and the beings themselves. Theological anthropology lies at its foundations and sees the human being as God’s creation, created in the likeness of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ, endowed with dignity, which distinguishes it from other creatures. Development and growth of human beings is of primary importance to human ecology, and its ultimate goal is the eternal life in the Kingdom of God.²⁵

2. ECOLOGY OF THE FAMILY

Benedict XVI, addressing the issue of broadly understood ecology, links it with the issue of the family. In his message delivered at XLI World Day of Peace (January 1, 2008) titled *Family as a Community of Peace*, the Pope claims that each family needs home, i.e. a suitable environment where it can thrive and hone its relations. The Pope extends this rhetoric to the whole human kind, with a call to make use of their home, created and offered in a creative and responsible way. In making the earth subject to man (Gen 1:28), man must be driven by the idea of the common good, rejecting short-sighted

²³ BENEDICT XVI: “Respect for Nature Must Go with Respect for Human Life,” sec. 49, *Wiadomości KAI*, December 11, 2011, 15; “Papież do młodych ekologów: Chroniąc przyrodę należy pamiętać o człowieku i Bogu Stwórcy 28 listopada 2011,” *Życie Zakonne* Website, Accessed March 4, 2017, <http://www.zyciezakonne.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/papiez-do-mlodych-ekologow-chroniac-przyrode-nalezyc-pamietac-o-czlowieku-i-bogu-stworcy-11652/>.

²⁴ BENEDICT XVI, “The State Cannot be a Band of Robbers. A Speech Delivered in Bundestag, 22.09.2011,” sec. 29, *Wiadomości KAI*, October 2, 2011, 21.

²⁵ Cf. Michał WYROSTKIEWICZ, “Od ekologii do ekologii ludzkiej,” in *Ekologia. Przesłanie moralne Kościoła*, ed. Janusz Nagórny and Jerzy Gocko (Lublin: Wyd. KUL, 2002), 100-4; Stanisław JAROMI, *Ecologia humana—chrześcijańska odpowiedź na kryzys ekologiczny* (Kraków: Bratni Zew, 2004).

egocentrism, which does not acknowledge other people's needs or does not care about generations yet to come. As has been already mentioned, Benedict XVI points towards a need to take care of the natural environment, draws attention to humanity and their own good, since it is human beings that are of greatest value. The poor are of special importance in this context as they, due to some short-sighted and greedy economic policies, are cut off from the manufactured goods, which are supposed to be available for everyone.²⁶

According to Benedict XVI, caring for our home, the earth, and maintaining an ecological balance requires a wise policy and dialogue on the part of experts. Ideological pressures should be avoided and a balanced model should be developed to provide well-being and prosperity to all the members of the human family, in alignment with a respect for the natural environment. Such policies come with certain costs, yet these should be distributed fairly, taking into account a different pace of countries' economical growth and solidarity with future generations. The Pope highlights the fact that consideration does not entail a delay or avoidance in making a decision but "obliges [us] to take a joint action after a moment's consideration of the road that needs to be taken, with the goal of strengthening the covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying."²⁷

Conceiving the Earth as our home is a requisite of dialogue, which helps to avoid egocentric decisions, often harmful to the environment and human family. Benedict XVI reminds us, in this context, of the meaning of international institutions, which may help to take appropriate decisions when it comes to the protection and management of the earth. He highlights a need to shape human conscience so that it rises to the challenge of a responsible cooperation.²⁸

The field that requires an intense dialogue between nations is energy resources. Benedict XVI sets forward two urgent tasks in this respect. Firstly, there is a need to verify the high standards of consumption in developed countries, which leads to high demands for energy, often fulfilled at the cost of developing countries. Secondly, there is a need to make in-

²⁶ BENEDICT XVI, "Family as the Community of Peace. Benedict XVI's Message for XLI World Day of Peace, 1.01.2008," *L'Osservatore Romano* 29(2008), 1: 7; cf. Marek FIAŁKOWSKI, "Stosunek Kościoła do świata," in *Teologia pastoralna*, vol. 1: *Teologia pastoralna fundamentalna*, ed. Ryszard Kamiński (Lublin: Atla 2, 2000), 284-5.

²⁷ BENEDICT XVI, "Family as the Community of Peace," 7.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8; Stanisław JAROMI, "'Ekologia rodziny' według Benedykta XVI," *Zielony Zeszyt REFA* 14(2005): 48-9.

vestments in order to diversify the sources of energy and boost the energetic efficiency.²⁹

All the nations on Earth are summoned to build the ties of solidarity and cooperation, which are characteristic of members of one family. They should constitute a community, with one beginning and one aim in the person of God. It should be stressed that the first form of community is love between man and woman, who decide to be together forever to start a family. Benedict XVI claims that a healthy family, the one built on love, justice, help, and care, helps to promote good social relations and attitudes which are necessary to recover a lost balance between people themselves, and thus between people and the environment. An internal integration of man, being able to build relationships with others and the surrounding environment, can be only realised through the family.³⁰

3. ECOLOGY OF PEACE

Benedict XVI reminded the faithful that ecology is inextricably linked with the issue of peace and justice in the world.³¹ In the message delivered at XL World Day of Peace (January 1, 2007) titled *Human Being as the Heart of Peace*, the Pope uses the term “ecology of peace,” which is an allusion to John Paul II’s “ecology of humanity.”³² The ecology of peace relies on human and social ecology, which are of great interest to Benedict XVI, especially their interrelations, having an impact on the respect for the natural world and peace between nations. According to the Pope, an involvement in human ecology fosters the growth of the “tree of peace.” Multifaceted examples of the ecology of peace can be found in a poem-prayer by St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of ecologists, titled *The Canticle of the Sun*.³³

²⁹ BENEDICT XVI, “Family as the Community of Peace,” 8; cf. Markus VOGT, “Wymowne milczenie. Komentarz do ekologicznego aspektu encykliki społecznej ‘Caritas in veritate’,” in *Spółczesność, gospodarka, ekologia. perspektywa “Caritas in veritate,”* ed. Stanisław Fel et al. (Lublin: KUL, 2010), 186-7.

³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, “Family as the Community of Peace,” 2; cf. Piotr MAJCHER, “Środowisko naturalne dobrem dla człowieka. Zarys ekoteologii papieża Benedykta XVI,” *Lex Credendi*, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.lexcredendi.pl/ekoteologia-Benedicta-xvi/>.

³¹ BENEDICT XVI, “If You Want to Build Peace,” 42.

³² JOHN PAUL II, *Centesimus Annus*, sec. 38.

³³ BENEDICT XVI, “The Human Person as the Heart of Peace,” 8 and 10; cf. Stanisław JAROMI, “Benedykta XVI ekologia pokoju,” *Zielony Zeszyt REFA* 13(2007): 54.

The ecology of peace seems to be a specific synthesis of the postulates derived from natural ecology, as well as human and social ecology. The main emphasis is laid on maintenance of peace, which is integrally related to the protection of nature, society and human beings. It should also acknowledge relations between man and God. Peace is a guarantee of good relations between the abovementioned entities since peace with God entails peace with people and the created world.³⁴

The ecology of peace should be understood as caring for peace and looking for measures to protect it, maintain it, and spread it across the world. Peace is of an intrinsic value to any human being, who can help it flourish in the world. It can be seen as a means to serve humanity and enable its growth. However, the ecology of peace also draws attention to man's attitude towards nature. If it is inappropriate, it affects human relations and relations with God, which in turn is detrimental to peace. Thus, the ecology of peace is tantamount to protection of the environment, aimed at bringing in and maintaining peace, which stems from an authentic concern about the planet and its use.³⁵

The idea of the ecology of peace is related to various problems posed by the broadly understood economic crisis and threats to peace. In this context, Benedict XVI mentions the problem of the energy resources supply and resulting disproportions in the development of certain regions and countries in the world. An ever-growing development of industry increases the demand for energy and fuels the ruthless race for new resources. This leads to tensions and antagonisms.

The destruction of the natural environment, its egoistic misuse and seizing natural goods in a violent way all lead to conflicts and wars. These conflicts take place mostly in poor countries, causing many deaths, destruction and degradation of the natural environment. A strong objection to the hostile ideas destroying peace, humanity and nature should be voiced.³⁶

The concept of the ecology of peace put forward by Benedict XVI draws attention to the significance of the relation between man and nature, which serves as the foundation of good social relations. It also calls for the appreciation of a social level of human existence and leads to a conviction that an integral human development has an effect on the natural environment.

³⁴ BENEDICT XVI, "The Human Person as the Heart of Peace," 8.

³⁵ Michał WYROSTKIEWICZ, "Ku 'ekologii pokoju'," *Summarium* 36(2007): 164-5.

³⁶ BENEDICT XVI, "The Human Person as the Heart of Peace," 9-10; BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, sec. 49.

Respecting nature and acknowledging human relations leads to the promotion and maintenance of peace in the world.³⁷

The teachings of Benedict XVI concerning ecology fit the teaching of the Church after the Second Vatican Council, continuing and developing some of its elements and pointing towards new perspectives. The three ecological areas present in the papal teachings show that it is mostly a theological aspect that requires an outlook on nature that would be based on the obedience of faith, which guarantees the development of an authentic ecology. Human beings, the primary beings, are responsible for the world, and must read God's plan concerning the world, see it as created by God, reflecting His traces and light. They are not responsible for the matter that can be manipulated without scruple. Benedict XVI is critical of any wrongdoing against the natural environment, the source of which lies in ignorance and consumerism. The Pope points out that the sources of the current economic crisis can be also found in the modern style of living, acting as if God did not exist, which leads to arrogance and degradation of nature.³⁸ Benedict XVI combines the issues of the protection of nature with humanity and its condition, and with the need to build social relations vital for keeping the balance between people and shape good relations with their environment. Protection of nature should be directed at maintenance and protection of peace, which is a consequence of taking care of the environment.

³⁷ M. WYROSTKIEWICZ, „Ku 'ekologii pokoju',” 169.

³⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Posynodalna Adhortacja Verbum Domini*, sec. 108; cf. BENEDICT XVI, “Świat nie jest czymś, co się posiada, by rabować i wykorzystywać,” *L'Osservatore Romano* 34(2013), 3-4: 43-5.

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