

A "Green" Thomism?

Conference Sows Seeds of Catholic Environmentalism

By Annamarie Adkins

ST. PAUL, Minnesota, NOV. 5, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Some commentators are describing Benedict XVI as "the green Pope" because of his continued reflections and exhortations -- particularly in his annual messages for the World Day of Peace -- on the importance of taking responsibility for the stewardship of creation and environmental resources.

But the Holy Father's reflections are notable mainly because they are seen by many as filling a relative vacuum in recent Catholic social ethics: a sustained and systematic approach to environmental problems through a robust theology of the stewardship of creation.

A conference this past weekend at the St. Paul Seminary, co-sponsored by the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, explored why, at the very moment when the world was coming into a deeper consciousness about the importance of conserving and protecting the natural environment, the Church seemed to have abandoned the possibility of a distinctly Catholic environmental ethic.

According to Christopher Thompson, dean of the St. Paul Seminary and organizer of the conference titled, "Renewing the Face of the Earth: The Church and the Order of Creation," there are two main reasons for the conspicuous absence of the Church from contemporary environmental debates.

The first is terminology.

"We don't live merely in an "environment,"" said Thompson, noting the Church's reticence about using this language. "To speak of creation and the environment is to speak of two distinct modes; man lives in the center of a created cosmos."

The second is more theoretical.

According to Thompson, "the stewardship of nature requires a philosophy of nature, that is, a metaphysic and philosophy of being that views creatures as dependent on God and located within a created order or cosmos. And that order has its own goodness, and its own natural ends.

"At the very moment in which created nature was emerging as a reality to be affirmed (albeit in distorted ways within secular circles), that same understanding of created nature was diminishing in philosophical and theological circles. [...] Without in any way diminishing the very real contributions of the nouvelle theologians, it is not unfair to say that one unintended consequence of these newer readings of Thomas was a hyper-critical sensitivity to overloading the natural order with too great a teleological significance.

"Thus, when the Church was said to be reading the 'signs of the times' and guiding this nascent movement, it was largely back-pedaling from the theological framework for adequately addressing these issues.

"As a result, many contemporary Catholic responses to environmental questions are either lack an appropriate theological and philosophical foundation or simply appropriate the language of secular environmentalism, which too often sees man as the enemy of creation, rather than its steward."

Many other notable philosophers and theologians including Dominican Father Charles Morerod, Janet Smith, Steven Long, Christopher Blum and Stratford Caldecott focused their papers on providing a firm intellectual foundation for a renewed Catholic response to questions of creation and stewardship. Bishop Frank Dewane of Venice, Florida, literary historian Joseph Pearce, and Dale Ahlquist of the American Chesterton Society delivered the keynote addresses.

Paper topics ranged from "Naming Environmental Sins" to "Developing a Catholic Paradigm for Sustainability." A consistent theme that ran through the weekend's proceedings was the usefulness and importance of the thought of Thomas Aquinas for a renewed Catholic environmental ethic based on a robust theology of creation and stewardship.

One purpose for the conference, according to Thompson, was to encourage Thomists to once again engage these issues.

Stewards of creation

"There is a sense that in Thomas, the Church has a philosopher-theologian who takes the order of nature seriously," said Thompson. "Because the world was created through the Logos, man can rationally participate in the order of nature and exercise his vocation of stewardship."

Not surprisingly, some at the conference called this the launch of "Green Thomism."

"Fortunately, the Church does not need to reinvent the wheel," added Thompson. "Before Aldo Leopold, 'Mother Earth News,' and 'Silent Spring,' a bevy of Catholic thinkers such as distributists Msgr. Luigi Ligutti and Father Vincent McNabb were applying Thomistic principles to the pressing environmental and economic questions of their day.

"Interestingly, in trying to develop a more humane economic order, they also fostered a deeper appreciation for the created order because of man's dependence upon it for his sustenance and spiritual well-being.

"Today's Thomists and the Church in general can retrieve these resources and others to help develop a renewed theology of creation and stewardship."

"This renewed consciousness of the created order is truly a moment of grace," said Thompson. "The Church is uniquely situated to respond to those who rightly see the importance of being responsible stewards of the environment.

"A robust theology of creation can not only provide necessary intellectual resources for stewardship, but also point those who stand in wonder at the awesomeness of the natural world to its origin and ultimate end: the Creator God."