The Human Meaning of Ecology

I finished the first quarter of eighth grade English with a D. Miss Cervenski gave me with a D. Branded me, really, because I still carry that scar.

In the second quarter our assignment was to create a photographic essay. After our proposals were approved, we were free to create, constrained only by our talents and imagination.

I chose as my essay the ills of pollution. Earth Day was only one year old and it was an era of Nixon and Nixon’s environmental legacy: Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and Environmental Protection Agency.

My photographic essay was one of only two to receive an A+. Clearly, I was always an environmentalist.

It was not until I deepened my faith and understanding of Catholic teaching – first in parish social ministry and then in diocesan social ministry – that the importance of environmentalism moved from head to heart to soul. Care for Creation is not just a value but central to our faith, just as Life and Dignity of the Human Person is central to our faith.

Actually. Life and Dignity of the Human Person is more than central to our faith; it is the foundational principle of our faith.

What is “Care for Creation?”

So what is Care for Creation? Here’s a summary of the Church teaching (which many of you know very well): "We show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan; it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation. This environmental challenge has fundamental moral and ethical dimensions that cannot be ignored." USCCB

Since the theme of this conference is Ecology, let me define it:

Ecology is the branch of biology dealing with the relations and interactions between organisms and their environment, including other organisms. Ecology is a science … and that definition sounds like it came from science.

Here’s a more understandable definition: Ecology is the relationship of everything in one system of life. One glorious, messy, complex system of life where the cause and effect of our actions are not ignored but studied.

Since the title of this talk is "The Human Meaning of Ecology," let me define human ecology:

Human ecology is the discipline that focuses on humans and their interactions with their environments. For example, human values, wealth, life-styles, resource use, and waste, to name a few.

Human ecology is more than a science. It’s more than a social science. When we talk about human ecology, we are distinguishing and separating humans from other organisms and the environment. By definition we are recognizing the uniqueness of the human person.

Therefore, Ecology is much more than Environmentalism.
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Ecology is Human-Centric

And Ecology is much more than Creation, more than the birds and the flora, the bugs and the animals, the air and the water and the soil. Ecology must include humans; it needs to start with the human person as the center, as its focal point. That is our Catholic faith: ecology is human-centric.

“Catholics are not environmentalists first; we are called to respect creation and humanity, to protect the environment and the community, to consider nature and livelihood.”

Life and the dignity of the individual person

Ecology is human-centric because Life and Dignity of the Human Person is the foundational principle of our faith; it is the core of Catholic teaching. Human life is sacred.

The human person is unique. Humans are special, the pinnacle of creation.

In 2001, the U.S. Bishops issued their Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities: A Campaign in Support of Life. They explain why: “to put forth ‘a precise and vigorous reaffirmation of the value of human life and its inviolability, and at the same time a pressing appeal addressed to each and every person, in the name of God: respect, protect, love and serve life, every human life’ (The Gospel of Life, no. 5).”

The Pastoral Plan continues: “Human life is a precious gift from God; that each person who receives this gift has responsibilities toward God, self, and others; and that society, through its laws and social institutions, must protect and nurture human life at every stage of its existence.”

Yesterday we were blessed to hear Bishop Skylstad talk about the very influential Columbia River Watershed Pastoral Letter. Written in 2001, the Northwest bishops observed that, “The first and primary good to be preserved is the good of the individual person. Human life is sacred and the good of the community demands respect for that life.”

These words are not that much different from the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It says this: “Social justice can be obtained only in respecting the … dignity of man. The person represents the ultimate end of society … What is at stake is the dignity of the human person…” CCC 1929

In other words, to ensure that men and women retain their dignity and enhance their dignity, people must be the ultimate goal of our choices.

To repeat the words from the Columbia River Letter: “The first and primary good to be preserved is the good of the individual person. Human life is sacred and the good of the community demands respect for that life.”

This is illustrated in the very next sentence, “Environmental degradation can be particularly harmful to the unborn, the young and the elderly.”

And in the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, the U.S. bishops noted that their pastoral letters on war and peace, economic justice, and other social questions affecting the dignity of human life … taken together … constitute no mere assortment of unrelated initiatives but rather … a consistent strategy in support of all human life in its various stages and circumstances.”

“A consistent strategy in support of all human life in its various stages and circumstances.” See, when the Catholic Church declares the priority of the human person and that the human person is the pinnacle of creation, it articulates a broader teaching than most of us realize.
With this broad vision, let us consider how we could structure a human-centric ecology. Let us explore what human ecology really means. Let us consider five steps in an ecological cost-benefit analysis that illuminate the rights and responsibilities of the human person:

1. Stewardship
2. The Poor and Vulnerable
3. The Common Good
4. Solidarity
5. Economic Development

**First, Stewardship**

Humans are accountable for the fate of the earth.

God gave creation to man; he was to be steward of it.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis wrote “Our ‘dominion’ over the universe should be understood more properly in the sense of responsible stewardship.” “Nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.” “This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails.”

I like Catholic Relief Services’ exploration of the Catholic responsibility of stewardship: “environmental stewardship is our responsibility as Catholics. Catholic spirituality … places the human person in a unique position in the large web of life: as caretakers and stewards. This tradition calls for a deeper appreciation of the sanctity of all creation.”

Pope Francis isn’t saying anything new or radical. 14 years earlier, the Columbia River Bishops had a clear vision to the course they were to navigate “to work together to develop and implement an integrated spiritual, social and ecological vision for our watershed home, a vision that promotes justice for people and stewardship of creation.”

After marking the first point on their journey -- “Human life is sacred and the good of the community DEMANDS respect for that life” -- they arrived at their second point: “The Columbia Watershed and all creation are entrusted to our loving care. As persons created in the image of God and as stewards of creation (Genesis 1-2), we are challenged to both use and respect created things.”

Yes, man is the pinnacle of creation and man *without* creation ceases to exist. Therefore, when considering a proposal affecting the environment, when weighing the costs and benefits and balancing the concerns between earth and man, then when considering the priority to be given man, the first priority is our responsibility as responsible stewards. The first question we must ask is, “Are we being responsible stewards of creation?”

**The Second Consideration is for the Poor and Vulnerable**

When considering the impact on man, our faith demands that our first analysis is the impact on the men, women, and children who are poor and vulnerable.

Our teaching is clear: “A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable FIRST.”

*USCCB*
Let us remember that Saint Francis is not the patron saint of the environment. Saint Francis is the patron saint of ecology. And Saint Francis linked care for creation with care for the poor. Perhaps it’s not much of a stretch to say that the concept of “human ecology” began with Saint Francis. That is a terrific legacy!

In 2010, Pope Benedict wrote a pivotal message for the World Day of Peace, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*. Pope Benedict stressed “The environment must be seen as God’s gift to all people, and the use we make of it entails a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future generations.”

“The Catholic Church brings a distinct perspective to the discussion of environmental questions, by lifting up the moral dimensions of these issues and the needs of the most vulnerable among us. This unique contribution is rooted in Catholic teaching calling us to care for creation and for ‘the least of these.’ (Mt 25:40)”

The principle of care for creation has been woven in church teaching since scripture. So when Pope Francis prophesies on ecology, he is advancing the work of his predecessors. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis echoes Pope Benedict “the principle of the common good immediately becomes … a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.”

Yes, man is the pinnacle of creation, but when we analyze the value of our ecological impacts and balance the concerns between earth and man, the second question we ask is, not, how does this affect me but, “How does this impact the poor and vulnerable?”

“How does this impact the poor and vulnerable?”

How have we answered this question?

In *Renewing the Earth*, the U.S. bishops note that “the poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering.”

Putting their words into action, the U.S. bishops established its Environmental Justice Program to educate and engage Catholics in activities dealing with environmental problems, particularly as they affect the poor. This afternoon we are privileged to hear from the manager of the Environmental Justice Program, Cecilia Calvo.

Here is one definition of Environmental Justice: the search for a just solution to the disproportionate burdens of environmental degradation borne by the poor and people of color.

Let’s look at two examples of such disproportionate burdens: Water and Agriculture.

“One particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor” says Pope Francis (*Laudato Si’*) “Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity.”

The right to a life … Consider this:

- Every 15 seconds a child dies from a water-related illness
- More than 3 ½ million people die each year from a water-related disease
- 1.1 billion people do not have access to safe water: clean, sanitary water. I imagine that none of us here are concerned with the *safety* of our water. If we drank a glass of water this morning, its cleanliness was not our worry. We have the fortune of options. For example, here at the University of Portland, we are rightly concerned with not using plastic water bottles. Many people in the world do not have options; they’re simply longing for water that is safe.
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From the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church “By its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many … The right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right.” 485

- 1.1 billion people do not have access to safe water

Fifteen years after the Compendium was published, Pope Francis reaffirms this special characteristic of water “[W]e know that water is a scarce and indispensable resource and a fundamental right which conditions the exercise of other human rights. This indisputable fact overrides any other assessment of environmental impact …”

Agriculture

Let’s look at agriculture: Agriculture is the main source of livelihood for most poor rural people, and it is also the human activity most directly affected by climate change.

Climate change poses a considerable threat to poor farmers and rural communities in developing countries. Even small increases in temperatures lead to reduced crop yields for those living at lower latitudes, especially in seasonally dry and tropical regions like Central America, South America, and Africa.

More frequent and extreme weather events – droughts and floods – make local crop production even more difficult. Climate change is expected to put an estimated 49 million more people at risk of hunger by 2020. 2020. This is 2015; 2020 is only 5 years away. 49 million more people at risk of hunger by 2020.

You can read first-hand accounts of these environmental realities from Catholic Relief Services. Take coffee, for example. Who had a cup of coffee this morning? Who needs a cup of coffee before anyone can talk to them? Your coffee now grows in Central America at 4000 feet. 4000 feet will be too hot by 2020. That’s five years from now.

During our coffee breaks, we’re drinking fair-trade coffee thanks to Catholic Relief Services and Equal Exchange. By 2020, fair-trade coffee growers will have to move from 4000 feet up to 4600 feet. That is, if land is available; that is, if they can sell their current land.

There’s much more to agriculture than the effects of climate change and its effect on poor and vulnerable people. For example, take the U.S. Farm Bill.

Catholic bishops hold a special place for agriculture “because it is about what is happening to food and farming, rural communities and villages, in the face of increasing concentration, new technology, and growing globalization in agriculture.”

Rural communities and small towns are the backbone of the social and economic life of America. Rural communities are also experiencing much greater poverty than urban areas.

The U.S. bishops wrote that “The primary goals of agriculture policies should include … reducing poverty among farmers and farmworkers …”

The U.S. Farm Bill provides billions of dollars in subsidies to large growers of the big five crops: corn, cotton, rice, wheat and soy.

Our bishops urged that the Farm Bill target limited resources, such as subsidies and direct payments, to those farmers and ranchers who truly need assistance to be competitive and successful.

They urged support for our small and medium-sized farmers and ranchers who truly need assistance by reducing subsidies to larger growers and industrial agriculture.
Ask yourselves then, how does our support of a Farm Bill that subsidizes the agribusiness industry impact poor and vulnerable small and medium-sized farms?

As you drink a cup of fair-trade coffee during our coffee break, ponder the plight of the poor and vulnerable.

As you drink a glass of water today, consider how fortunate you are that you live in a developed country, where the water is safe.

**The Third Step in our analysis is the Common Good**

When considering the impact on man, our faith demands that we consider not just the impact on the people important to us, but to all people. We must ask ourselves, not what is best for me but what is best for all.

You’ve heard this scripture passage before:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'”

People are created in the image and likeness of God and are called to be neighbors to one another. We are created as social beings who must exercise a certain responsibility toward our neighbors. This responsibility is to promote the good of the entire human community and the good of our common home.

Here’s our Church definition of the common good: “The human person is essentially a social being. On coming into this world, we are not equipped with everything we need for developing bodily and spiritual life. We need others. We live, work, and worship with others. Because our lives are lived with others, our human rights are realized in community, and we all must work together, across generational and economic lines, for the sake of the common good, for the general welfare of the entire human family.”

*USCCB, 1983*

“In the concept of the common good, community and individual needs take priority over private wants…”

*CRWSPL*

This Catholic Principle of the common good applies equally to ecological considerations.

“Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of … respecting a common good.” Compendium 466

“Human ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good …,” writes Pope Francis. (*Laudato Si’*)

From Pope Benedict: “The goods of creation belong to humanity as a whole.” *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*

What are these goods? The Columbia River bishops tell us these are the land, the air and the water. “The common good demands a proper respect for [these goods] to assure that when we have passed through this land it remains habitable and productive for those who come after us.”

Pope Francis adds another good, “The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all.” *Laudato Si’*

The climate is a common good. Wow!
In his letter to Congress on Carbon Pollution Standards, Archbishop Wenski, our opening keynote speaker for this conference, wrote that “We are also reminded that action for the common good … must be guided by the important principles offered by Catholic social teaching, so that regulation and solutions might truly serve the human person toward full flourishing.”

What did the Northwest Bishops observe about the effects of development on the common good in the Columbia River Basin?

Quote: “Along the Columbia River, the first peoples in the region generally adapted themselves to the Great River. … They fished for salmon, hunted wild game and gathered roots and berries to sustain themselves.

Unregulated fishing and cannery industries seriously depleted salmon supplies. The River People were forced to live a modified way of life on severely diminished lands, with less abundant salmon runs. Eventually, dams on the Columbia-Snake river system, and open sea fishing operations in the Pacific Ocean had further impacts on the species. In 1957, the opening up of the Dalles Dam destroyed Celilo Falls, a tremendously important Native American fishing area.”

Unfortunately, economic development that altered this magnificent region was implemented without consideration for the common good, especially the River People.’ END QUOTE

If you live here you’re familiar with the majestic glory of the Columbia River Gorge. For our visitors, I hope that last night’s immersion experience gave you a taste of what is so special about this area, and why the Columbia River Watershed Pastoral Letter had to be written.

Today along the Columbia River, we are entertaining building a private water bottling plant; we have a coal plant and coal exports. In 2010, trains unloaded 80 million tons of freight in Oregon and Washington. Proposed coal export projects would triple that number. That increased tonnage would require 50 to 60 coal trains a day, each coal train carrying up to 145 uncovered cars carrying coal.

As I was travelling through the Gorge recently, I counted an 85-car train as I waited for it to pass. I waited a long time. Imagine doubling that to 145 cars! Uncovered!

Yes, man is the pinnacle of creation, but in a human-centric ecology, our analysis of the value of our impacts balanced against the concerns between earth and man, the question we ask is, not, how does this benefit me but, “What is best for the greatest number of people?” What best serves the common good?

**The Fourth Step in our analysis is the Consideration of Solidarity**

There can be no question that our Catholic faith emphasizes the ethics of solidarity, promoting cooperation and a just structure of sharing in the world community.

“The principle of the common good immediately becomes … a summons to solidarity ….“ So wrote Pope Francis (Laudato Si’)

The symbol of our faith is the crucifix. Imagine the cross: vertically symbolizing all people who came before us and all people who come after us;

And horizontally symbolizing our brothers and sisters who live next door, in the next county, in the next state, who stretch as far east as we can imagine and as far west as we can imagine, stretching so far that eventually they connect and we realize that all are our brothers and sisters.

“The pain of one, even the smallest member, is the pain of all” (St. Augustine, Sermo Denis).
Pope Benedict asked, could we “disregard the growing phenomenon of ‘environmental refugees,’ people who are forced by the degradation of their natural habitat to forsake it … in order to face the dangers and uncertainties of forced displacement? Can we remain impassive in the face of actual and potential conflicts involving access to natural resources?” If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation

“The pain of one, even the smallest member, is the pain of all.”

The competition for natural resources has many wondering about the prospects for human solidarity.

But, by looking at how we live together in solidarity, we can develop a better understanding of how to protect the natural resources we most value.

Let us consider two areas of Solidarity: Today’s Cultures and Tomorrow’s Generations

Pope Francis reminds us that, “Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: …There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation.” (Laudato Si’)

That is, they have left their culture not necessarily from choice … not even close.

Pope Francis has much to say on cultures. He says:

- “It is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions.”
- “Ecology, then, also involves protecting the cultural treasures of humanity in the broadest sense. More specifically, it calls for greater attention to local cultures when studying environmental problems.”
- “Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality.”
- “The local population should have a special place at the table; they are concerned about their own future and that of their children, and can consider goals transcending immediate economic interest.”
- “Authentic development includes efforts to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life, and this entails considering the setting in which people live their lives.”

Solidarity with the cultures of our brothers and sisters as far east and as far west but still farther than we can see.

**Solidarity with Tomorrow’s Generations**

I said that the symbol of our faith is the crucifix. Imagine the cross: horizontally symbolizing care for creation in the broadest, Catholic sense of the phrase;

And vertically symbolizing all people who came before us upon whose shoulders we stand, and all people who come after us whose lives depend on us and how we live today.

Again, Pope Francis “The notion of the common good also extends to future generations... We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from intergenerational solidarity.” (Laudato Si’)

The question we must ask ourselves is what we are passing on to future generations.
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Pope Benedict has very strong words on intergenerational solidarity:

- In his 2010 World Day of Peace Message he wrote, “The goods of creation belong to humanity as a whole. Yet the current pace of environmental exploitation is seriously endangering the supply of certain natural resources not only for the present generation, but above all for generations yet to come.” *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*

- And in 2008, addressing the impact of human behavior on development: “sustainable development for future generations is of ‘vital importance.’”

I say that we must consider today’s unborn, infants and toddlers, who are tomorrow’s children, teenagers and adults. We must consider my 17-month old grandson and his children.

*The Catholic Culture of Life Initiative: First 1000 Days* is a campaign to underscore the most crucial period of a child’s development: from conception through a child's second birthday. These 1000 days are our best opportunity to shape a healthier, more prosperous future for all children.

The campaign reflects on breast feeding, peace, adoption, nutrition and malnutrition, parenting, and harm to the unborn and the child from less than prudent environmental decisions. Consider this:

- The unborn, infants and young children are more sensitive than adults to toxins.

- Fetus and newborn will be subject to contaminants in greater concentration.

- Children eat a lot more food, drink more water, and breathe more air as a percentage of their body weight than adults. They receive a greater dose of whatever chemicals are present in the food, water and air.

- For most young children, exposure to pesticide begins in the WOMB.

- Exposure to air pollution during pregnancy can lead to preterm births and cause congenital birth defects such as heart problems. Exposure to air pollution during pregnancy can affect a child’s growth resulting in low birth weight.

- From the U.S. bishops: “It is hard to imagine a situation that so clearly illustrates [the] link between the environment and life issues as the impact of mercury … on children’s health. Children, inside and outside the womb, are uniquely vulnerable to environmental hazards and exposure to toxic pollutants in the environment.”

- Many chemicals can cross the placenta and may cause permanent damage to the child. Because children are exposed to environmental hazards at an earlier age than adults are, they have more time to develop slowly progressing environmentally triggered diseases.

- The Washington State Department of Ecology lists 66 chemicals that are of high concern to children.

- An estimated 80 to 90 percent of all cancer in humans is caused by exposure to carcinogens found in the environment. Cancer is now the number one disease killer of children from late infancy through early adulthood.

Therefore, when considering the value of our ecological impacts and balancing the concerns between earth and man, the fourth question we ask in a human-centric approach to ecology is, who is our neighbor – and we know from the parable of the Good Samaritan that the answer is everyone – and how does this affect our neighbor, who we see and who are unseen; who live today and who will live tomorrow? In solidarity.
Our Fifth and Final Consideration is the Purpose of Economic Development

Do we follow our Catholic principle which requires an equitable use of the earth's resources? Do we offer a direction for progress that respects human dignity and the limits of material growth?

This is our archprinciple: The economy must serve the people, not the other way around. Serving the people means a whole lot more than creating jobs.

In Laudato Si’, Pope Francis quotes the U.S. bishops “We are convinced that ‘man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life.’”

Serving the people means respecting the dignity of work and the rights of workers.

The he continues, “Any approach to an integral ecology … needs to take account of the value of labor.”

Serving the people also means respecting the home they live in.

Saint John Paul II wrote in his World Day of Peace Message in 1990, Peace with God the Creator:

“Often … economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural … vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.”

Eleven years later this Church teaching on respecting our home the Earth was collected in the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: “Solutions to the ecological problem require that economic activity respect the environment to a greater degree, reconciling the needs of economic development with those of environmental protection. Every economic activity making use of natural resources must also be concerned with safeguarding the environment and should foresee the costs involved … “

“An economy respectful of the environment will NOT have the maximization of profits as its only objective, because environmental protection cannot be assured solely on the basis of financial calculations of costs and benefits.” 470

To which I add that an economy respectful of the environment would offer a deeper and more careful analysis than job creation. In an economy where jobs are not easy to find and good-paying jobs are scarce, we are challenged to balance concern for the economy with concern for creation.

Our fifth and final human-centric consideration is whether we the people are being served beyond job creation, or are we the people merely serving the economy.
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**Conclusion**

Yes, it is clear from our Catholic teaching that ecology must first be human-centric. Now, what does human-centric ecology look like? It is much broader than many of SUPPOSE.

These are the five steps in an ecological cost-benefit analysis that is human-centric:

1. Are we being responsible stewards of creation?
2. How does this impact the poor and vulnerable?
3. What is best for the greatest number of people?
4. Who is our neighbor and how does this affect our neighbor, who we see and are unseen; who live today and will live tomorrow?
5. Are man and creation being served by economic development?

Perhaps the question whether ecology must first be human-centric is answered by another question: How is the human person called to care for God’s creation, with all that the responsibilities that flow from this principle? Not “if” but “how.”

Pope Benedict stressed that “creation must be considered as beginning with God.” He mourned that “the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behavior.” He urges us to realize that creation is harmed “where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone.”

Not if we are called to care for God’s creation, but how.

From our Catechism: “The seventh commandment – You shall not steal – enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Animals … plants and inanimate beings, are … destined for the common good of past, present, and future humanity. …” CCC 2415

Not if we are called to care for God’s creation, but how.

“Our human understanding ... can understand what God tells us by means of his creation ... only in a spirit of humility and respect before the Creator and his work.” CCC299.

Let me offer an example from my past:

I grew up in Illinois where the highest point in the entire state was 1000 feet. In Oregon, 1000 feet is called a speed bump. I attended the University of Notre Dame in upstate Indiana where I ran track and cross country. Coach had to drive the cross country team to the most pitiful ski lodge just so we could practice running hills.

I spent the summer before my senior year in South Lake Tahoe and yes, this boy from the Midwest was awestruck by the mountains and I knew that I was witnessing the handiwork of God. I was humbled. I remember stopping in the middle of a run on the sands of Lake Tahoe, sitting down and staring at the mountains, thinking about God.
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How are called to care for God’s creation? Let me use The Parable of the Tenants

There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey.

When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce.

But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned.

Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way.

Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.’

They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him.

What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?”

They answered him, “He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times.”

In FaithND, Notre Dame’s Daily Reflection on the Gospel and Prayer, I came across this parable as the Gospel reading for the day, and a reflection written by Anthony Paz, who coordinated Sunday’s liturgy for us. Anthony reflected that “the tenants responded with extreme violence in the face of repeated good will from the owner of the vineyard.”

His comment gave me a thought, “How often do we forget that God “owns” all of creation and yet we respond with extreme violence? We rationalize this violence as economic progress.”

We have a moral imperative to care for all creation. Not “if” but “how.” To quote Pope Francis, this is “an approach to ecology which respects our unique place as human beings in this world and our relationship to our surroundings.” Laudato Si’

In Pope Benedict’s 2010 World Day of Peace Message, he placed the environmental considerations of the day squarely within the richness of Catholic thought. “The Church has a responsibility towards creation, and she considers it her duty to exercise that responsibility in public life, in order to protect earth, water and air as gifts of God the Creator meant for everyone, and above all to save mankind from the danger of self-destruction.”

Now, pay attention to this:

“Respect for creation is of immense consequence … its preservation has now become essential for the [peaceful] coexistence of mankind. Man’s inhumanity to man has given rise to numerous threats to peace and to authentic and integral human development – wars, international and regional conflicts, acts of terrorism, and violations of human rights. Yet no less troubling are the threats arising from the neglect – if not downright misuse – of the earth and the natural goods that God has given us.” *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*

Pope Benedict words echoes similar thoughts written 20 years earlier by Saint John Paul II:

“World peace is threatened not only by the arms race, regional conflicts and continued injustices among peoples and nations, but also by a lack of due respect for nature, by the plundering of natural resources and by a progressive decline in the quality of life.” *1990 World Day of Peace Message, Peace with God the Creator*
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Did you catch that? Among threats to world peace, Saint John Paul II equates lack of respect for nature with the arms race and regional conflicts.

And Pope Benedict places wars, international and regional conflicts, acts of terrorism, and violations of human rights as equals to neglect and misuse of the earth and the natural goods. This should cause us to sit up and take notice!

So while our foundational principle is Life, Care for Creation is firmly cemented atop this bedrock principle.

We give priority to mankind but good ecological choices are necessary to guarantee the dignity of the person, his or her fundamental rights, and their very existence.

In a human-centric ecology, protecting creation is a justice issue. If you want peace, work for justice, justice for the human person; justice for all creation.

A human-centric ecology considers the human; a Catholic-focused view of human-centric ecology asks us to consider our own role and our own responsibility. Accept that our responsibility is broader than you once thought. Accept that even world peace depends on us treating creation justly.

The solution, my friends, is to demand government and corporations to change. The solution, my friends, is not to wait for government and corporations to change. Change begins with each one of us; within each one of us.

If you want peace, you work for justice – you work for justice for men, women and children; you work for justice for all creation. If you want peace, work for justice; you work for justice including creation. That is the Human Meaning of Ecology. Thank you.