

Perennial Wisdom: Notes Toward a Green Thomism[★]

CHRISTOPHER THOMPSON
Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity
St. Paul, MN

IN HIS 2010 World Day of Peace message, Pope Benedict XVI made an urgent appeal for a fundamental renewal of our thinking on the comprehensive question concerning the stewardship of creation. “Humanity needs a profound cultural renewal,” he asserted, “it needs to rediscover those values which can serve as the solid basis for a brighter future for all.”¹

The arguments proposed here suggest that the principal resource from which a “solid basis” for a renewal can be constructed lies in the intellectual tradition of St. Thomas Aquinas. My objectives are positive in character and are directed toward encouraging a relationship between Thomists and environmentalists, between Catholicism and the green movements.² My aim is to plant the seeds for a green Thomism, if you will—a Thomistic appropriation of environmental concerns.

★ This is a revised and updated version of the keynote address given at The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity conference on “The Church and the Order of Creation,” October 2009.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI: For the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 2010: If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation*, online at: www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace_en.html.

² Others who have sought to integrate these issues include: Willis Jenkins, “Biodiversity and Salvation: Thomistic Roots for Environmental Ethics,” *Journal of Religion*, 83.3 (2003): 401–20; idem, *Ecologies of Grace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Fr. Robert Grant, *A Case Study in Thomistic Environmental Ethics: The Ecological Crisis in the Loess Hills of Iowa* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); Jill LeBlanc, “Eco-Thomism,” *Environmental Ethics* 21 (1999): 293–306. For an opposing view, see Francisco Benzoni, “Thomas Aquinas and Environmental Ethics: A Reconsideration of Providence and Salvation,” *Journal of Religion* 85

There are many challenges before us.³

First, from within secular circles, there is the charge that Christianity itself is, to a large extent, responsible for the ecological crises that are upon us today.

Roderick Nash develops this thesis about the Christian roots of our ecological distress.⁴ In his book, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, he chronicles the history of the efforts in the United States to preserve “wilderness areas,” (giving special attention to the historic accomplishment achieved by the U.S. Congress, namely, the passage of the Wilderness Preservation Act, signed into law in 1964).

Nash argues that Christianity is replete with notions of unfettered “dominion” over the earth—an earth which is seen for the most part as a barren wasteland: fallen, and in need of a developing hand in order to be made useful. The Christian man dreams, Nash suggests, of a life without “wilderness,” and he suggests that wilderness—that is, pristine, undeveloped regions—is often seen in the Christian tradition as the sign of a divine curse and abandonment. This negative view continues through the New Testament, he says, and finds various spokesmen throughout the Christian tradition. In the more immediate context of American religious history, Nash points to Deism, Transcendentalism, and more broadly to Romanticism as the intellectual forebears of any authentic environmental awareness. Christian tradition, he argues, supports a kind of eco-ignorance.

To some extent, Nash’s cultural history is borne out. We find that those who are concerned for the environment are often at odds with those who might hold to a traditional Catholicism. But ought Catholics themselves adopt such a narrative stance? Are we to understand our Catholicism, more broadly our Christianity, as the source of the environmental crisis?

Nowhere does Nash make mention of the creation accounts of Genesis, the canticle of Azariah and his companions in the Book of Daniel, the Wisdom Literature, including the many psalms⁵ in which the created

(2005): 446–76; also his *Ecological Ethics and the Human Soul: Aquinas, Whitehead and the Metaphysics of Value* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). For an engaging critique of the latter, see Christopher Brown’s review at *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, online at: ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=13765.

³ Portions of this section have been taken from my “Beholding the Logos: The Church, the Environment, and the Meaning of Man,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 12.3 (2009) 33–52.

⁴ Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th rev. ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, rpt. 1978). To quote Nash, “If paradise was early man’s greatest good, wilderness . . . was his greatest evil.” *Wilderness*, 9.

⁵ While the themes of creation’s splendor are noted throughout the Wisdom literature, Psalms 8, 19, 104, and 148 seem especially apt for our consideration.

order is celebrated as not merely good, but very good. Nowhere does he recognize the logos theology of the early Church, which points in a similar direction; that is, in encountering the beauty and splendor of the untamed cosmos, one encounters the Logos, the second person of the Trinity, who is its source and summit. Nor does he recognize any of the countless witnesses of the artistic tradition of the Church. One recalls briefly the image of Christ's cross depicted in the mosaic of the apse of San Clemente in Rome: there the cross is set amidst the splendid array of all manner of flora and fauna which surrounds it in illuminating gold and glory. That is simply one instance among thousands that affirm the splendor and dignity of all creation, "which rightly gives you praise." Perhaps not surprisingly, he makes no mention of Saint Thomas.

And yet, while the Catholic intellectual tradition has a long and extensive history of contemplating the splendor of creation and its status as the *vestigia dei*, indeed the *vestigia trinitas*, in some important ways Catholicism has not developed an equally robust theology of the stewardship of that creation. Scholars like Nash are not without some legitimacy in criticizing the Christian legacy on these questions.

Granted, we have seen an emerging emphasis concerning the call to stewardship, especially during the papacy of John Paul II⁶ and more recently with Benedict XVI. These efforts are relatively recent in the overall conversations and in some ways appear to be a reaction to what is taking place outside Catholic theological circles, rather than as catalysts for new and engaging reflections.⁷

Consider the publication of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace to highlight the Church's attitude toward environmental stewardship, entitled *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment, 1972–2002*. The author Marjorie Keenan comments, "Within the social teaching of the Catholic church, the environmental question is often considered of only recent concern."⁸

⁶ John Paul II, *Peace with God, Peace with All of Creation: Message of His Holiness John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, January 1, 1990, marks one of the more important moments in the Church's magisterium concerning our responsibilities for stewarding creation.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI's most recent comments for the World Day of Peace, 2010, signal an important step forward in urging the intellectual community to a vigorous engagement with these questions—precisely at the level of first principles, not only policy.

⁸ Sr. Marjorie Keenan, R.S.H.M., *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern for the Holy See for the Environment* (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2002), Preface.

And so, it seems, there is a discrepancy in our account, a fundamental contradiction in the exposition of our tradition: on the one hand, there is an extensive tradition speaking of the beauty and value of the created order; on the other, there is a ready admission, even on the part of the Church's magisterium, that her doctrinal teachings on matters pertaining to the environment are conspicuously brief and relatively new.

Is Nash correct in declaring the true character of the Christian heritage to be fundamentally hostile to any kind of care of the earth? Is the emerging environmental awareness—so captivating to contemporary imaginations—on a collision course with Catholicism? Can Catholics be trusted as faithful stewards?

One could try to reconcile the elements by arguing that issues of stewardship are especially acute only in the light of more recent technological developments and that the Church is not unexpectedly slow to develop a doctrinal position on these complex matters. But this approach masks a deeper issue and would fail to take into consideration the marked difference in the development of thought in secular and in theological circles.

Gaudium et Spes, for example, defends the notion that man cannot use earthly things without reference to the creator. But the remarks are largely said in support of technological development and the fundamental compatibility of science and faith—not primarily for reasons of stewardship, much less the preservation or conservation of earthly things. Under-scoring the lacuna, John Paul II two decades later commented, “One must add that the problem of ‘the legitimate autonomy of earthly things’ is also linked with today’s deeply felt problem of ‘ecology,’ that is, the concern for the protection and preservation of the natural environment.”⁹ The absence of an explicit call for stewardship in *Gaudium et Spes* is conspicuous in light of the fact that, while the document was being crafted, one of the most important pieces of legislation in environmental efforts was ratified in the United States, namely, the Wilderness Preservation Act of 1964.

When one places such milestones in secular circles against the effort of a Church hoping to come to terms with the “modern world,” an interesting difference between the two ambits emerges. What accounts for the discrepancies among narratives: an unbroken tradition concerning the significance of creation along side a reticence to call for its care? To put the matter in a more focused way: what accounts for the fact that Thomists, in particular, seemed especially aloof in the conversation concerning stewardship, a conversation that would seem to be central to their tradition?

⁹ John Paul II, General Audience, April 2, 1986, at www.disf.org/en/documentation/12-860402_Creation.asp; for another example among several; see also his general audience of January 24, 2001, at www.ncrlc.com/eco_conversion.html.

In the remainder of this essay, I want to offer some reflections on how this might have come about.



The dissonance between a tradition that affirms the value of creation and the call for an environmental stewardship is due to a nexus of distinct conditions which constitute the overall challenge facing the church today. There are reasons, in other words, that a fissure appears between the theoretical affirmations of the goodness of creation and the apparent reticence to engage the practical aspects of stewardship: reasons which have their roots in both secular and theological circles, but which together comprise the overall climate in which the issues are treated even now.

The first condition concerns terminology. In fact, to speak of “creation” and to speak of the “environment” is to speak in two distinct modes; the two orders are not synonymous. To put it succinctly: as far as Catholic theological tradition is concerned, while the human person may live in an environment, the human person is not exhausted by that environment. Rather, the human person, at once corporeal and spiritual, dwells in a world—a created cosmos. And to conflate the two orders, as if we were speaking of the same things in the same way, distorts the issues at hand. Specifically, one runs the risk of disfiguring the portrait of the human person who lies at the center of a created cosmos, not merely an environment. Thus, learning to appreciate the significance of a doctrine of creation, as opposed to developing an environmental sensitivity, provides both the necessary hermeneutic for an appropriation of the tradition as well as a sufficient preamble for all those who are rightly interested in the obligations of stewardship.

Josef Pieper, in an essay entitled “The Philosophical Act,” speaks of the difference in meaning when we speak of something in a “location,” something in an “environment,” and something in a “world.”¹⁰ What differentiates proper usage, Pieper argues, is not a consideration of the object’s ambient circumstance; rather, it is the distinct capacities of the object itself. Thus, we speak of the “location” of rock, the “location” of

¹⁰ The essay forms the second half of his famous *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. See Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 98. Ironically, it was Sigurd Olson, the Minnesota naturalist, who first alerted me to this insight of Josef Pieper. For an introduction to Olson’s works, see Sigurd F. Olson, *The Meaning of Wilderness: Essential Articles and Speeches*, ed. David Backes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001). To what extent Olson studied Aquinas directly is not known, but historians have noted that Olson’s copy of Pieper’s *Leisure* was heavily marked.

shale, or the “location” of oil because rocks, shale, and oil are rather simple in their operations, their activities. But when it comes to plants and animals, we speak not only of their location, but now of their environment, because plants and animals do not merely occupy a position; they inhabit a place and interact with the elements surrounding them, drawing their ambient resources into their more complex operations.

But there is only one kind of creature, Pieper suggests, who occupies a world, a *cosmos*, and it is precisely the human person. The human person, with his or her capacity for intellectual comprehension and understanding, occupies not merely a location, not merely an environment, but a *cosmos*. And it is this unique spiritual capacity which renders all conversations about “humans and their environment” inadequate.

This unique spiritual capacity of the species differentiates us from the rest of the created order and it grounds our position in a *world*—as more than creatures dwelling in an environment. To be human, Pieper writes, “is to know things beyond the ‘roof’ of the stars, to go beyond the trusted enclosures of the normal, to go beyond the ‘environment’—to the ‘world’ in which that environment is enclosed.”¹¹

Thomas’s vision of creation and man provides for us today a methodology still adequate to our task of developing a sound Catholic environmental stance, for it recognizes the priority of the person as an intellectual creature, as a creature comprising something more than a fabric of material causes, as one that is situated within the broader plan of a theologically charged cosmos, a created order whose finality ends in the fulfillment of the plan of salvation.

At the same time, however, it needs to be kept in mind that the development of a sound ecological praxis will not be achieved simply by reiterating a few principles of anthropology concerning the intellectual capacities of the human being, however compelling those capacities may be. In order to develop a sound vision of our relationship within the created order we need to reaffirm the ontological priority of that same order which is the intellectual creature’s necessary habitat. For no human being, not even one capable of contemplating an intelligible cosmos, does so in a vacuum. Rather, the native habitat of the human person as an embodied, intellectual creature is a material cosmos of created natures, the ontological density of which prepares the person for an engagement with Being. St. Thomas insists that, despite the dignity of the human being as an intellectual creature, the human person nonetheless occupies the lowest order of intellectual beings because the human person is

¹¹ Pieper, *Leisure*, 94.

utterly dependent upon a material phantasm in order to engage in intellectual acts.

Thus at the heart of a sound environmental ethic consonant with Catholic tradition lies a metaphysics and natural philosophy of being which provides, among other things, a robust vision of an order of intelligible creatures, utterly dependent upon a provident God, whose causality extends to the operations of individuals—their formal intelligibility, as well as their finality.¹² It is not enough to “return to the subject,” then, to the spiritually rich capacity of the *imago*, even when such a notion of the person is rightly contrasted against the reductive visions of its materialist rivals.

Rather, in order to properly cast the human person as an intellectual creature inhabiting a material cosmos one will need a realist philosophy as the necessary complement of the human person as precisely an intellectual creature. In addition, then, to the contemplative character of human intellection, one needs the intelligible object as the intellect’s proper referent: *material creatures*, charged with formal meaning and finally ordered toward the common good of the universe are the proper objects of human intellection and as such *material creation* in its intelligible splendor is the fitting “environment” of the human person.¹³

In such a realist world, the order of causality is understood to inhere in things. The formal intelligibility of living organisms as well as the finalities toward which they naturally tend are objectively constituted in reality. Such an order is not derived from a set of clear and distinct ideas of a disembodied cogito (Descartes); it is not the imposition of a transcendental reason (Kant); nor is it the mere force of habit or custom (Hume). Such an order is intrinsic to things and its apprehension by reason is an exercise in objective knowing.¹⁴

¹² *Summa theologiae* I, q. 48, a. 5; I, q. 47, a. 1.

¹³ One wonders, in passing, what a theology of the body might mean within the context of a theology of the bodies that constitute the unique environment of man, as the composite being of rational soul and body. Yet this author is unaware of any attempt on the part of those engaged in the “theology of the body” to consider its implications for the embodiment of human beings within an intelligibly constituted universe of creatures—an environment. There is no entry for “environment” or its allied notions in the otherwise copiously prepared index of Michael Waldstein’s remarkable achievement *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). What is needed is a theology of embodiment, a theological anthropology that extends beyond the confines of the corporeal human being.

¹⁴ “The first act of the intellect is to know, not its own action, not the ego, not phenomena, but objective and intelligible being.” Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *OP, Reality: A Synthesis of Thomistic Thought*, trans. Patrick Cummins, O.S.B. (Saint Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1950), 388.

What is needed is an understanding of the human person as an intellectual creature *precisely as situated within a natural order of intelligible substances*, a multi-textured complex of teleologically ordered wholes, whose existence is ordered toward God as first and final cause. Recovering the significance of formal and final causality of the material creation as articulated in the classic Thomistic natural philosophy would go a long way toward restoring an appropriate grasp of the environmental questions at stake.¹⁵

In many ways, one can understand the increasing emergence of environmental awareness as the unthematic revolt of conscience among those descendants of the Enlightenment who intuit that something is deeply flawed in our approaches to the natural order and that our habits of treating nature as a mere raw datum of purposeless matter is not consonant with the “facts on the ground,” so to speak. To the extent that Thomism can contribute to the renewal of an eco-realism, to that extent its contribution will be significant, for it will supply not only a richer notion of the person as the *subject* who stewards, but also a richer notion of created things as *objects* to be stewarded.¹⁶

To be sure, as a matter of practical exhortation, it is important to affirm that “without the Creator the creature would disappear,”¹⁷ that the denial

¹⁵ For an excellent discussion of the place of formal and final causality, see Giuseppe A. Tanzella-Nitti, “The Relevance of the Aristotelian-Thomistic Concept of Nature to the Contemporary Debate between Science and Theology,” *Annales Theologici* 9 (1995): 107–25. Also, *Faith, Reason and the Natural Sciences: The Challenge of the Natural Sciences in the Work of Theologians* (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, 2009). Not only would the recovery of form and finality aid in the speculative grasp of lower creation, it would facilitate the task of evangelization, by leading others to a consideration of the first and final cause of creation. The Church’s consistent affirmation that the existence of God can be discerned by reason alone through a consideration of the created order is not merely a statement about the capacity of unaided reason, or grace, or epistemology. By implication, the claim affirms the objective intelligibility of things, the order of which provides the rational basis for deducing a supreme first cause.

¹⁶ *ST I*, q. 79. “For by way of discovery, we come through knowledge of temporal things to that of things eternal, according to the words of the Apostle (Rm. 1:20), ‘The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made’: while by way of judgment, from eternal things already known, we judge of temporal things, and according to laws of things eternal we dispose of temporal things.” For St. Thomas, subjectivity and objectivity do not exhaust the parameters of the discussion; rather, Creator and creature form the poles of the Thomistic cosmos. He cannot, then, be charged with an anthropocentrism or geocentrism, when neither “anthropos” nor lower creation is at the center of his cosmology. See Josef Pieper, *Living the Truth: The Truth of All Things and Reality and the Good* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 1989).

¹⁷ *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

of God in one's consideration of this life leads to a profound distortion and abuse of things, especially each other. Yet this claim about the practical order needs to be complemented by the claim about the prior order of wonder: namely, that without the creature the Creator would disappear! That is, the first and proper object of the human intellect is neither God, nor the soul, nor any other immaterial principle,¹⁸ but the intelligibility of sensible substances of lower creation.¹⁹ Our knowledge of God begins, classic Thomism asserts, with the intellect's grasp of the sensible order of creatures, not with the intuition of God's existence. No theologically motivated account of stewardship which takes such philosophical realism seriously can abandon this fundamental starting point.

Commenting on this same "Creator/creature" passage from *Gaudium et Spes*, John Paul II "reverses the polarity," placing priority on the intelligibility of creatures as the basis upon which a Creator/first cause is postulated.

This truth [of creation] is fully manifested in revelation. But it is per se accessible to human reason. We can deduce this from the overall reasoning of the Council text and in particular from the phrase: "Without the Creator the creature would disappear. . . . When God is forgotten, however, the creature itself grows unintelligible." These expressions (*at least indirectly*) indicate that the created world postulates an Ultimate Reason, a First Cause. By virtue of their very nature, contingent beings, in order to exist, require the support of the Absolute (of Necessary Being), which is Existence per se (Subsisting Being). The fleeting and contingent world "cannot exist without the Creator."²⁰

The point here is to emphasize that whereas Thomists and environmentalists might part ways on the intellectual/spiritual nature of the person, each side can at least agree that the starting point for a consideration of our position in the world is an affirmation of the intelligibility of created things. Indeed, for the Thomist, the task of developing a theologically informed doctrine of stewardship will have to unfold as every practical inquiry does, namely, *beginning* with the speculative grasp of intelligible things. The stewardship of nature will require the recovery of a realist philosophy of creatures.²¹

¹⁸ *ST* I, q. 88, a. 3; *ST* I, q. 87, aa. 1–4; *ST* I, q. 88, a. 1.

¹⁹ *ST* I, q. 84, a. 7; q. 85, a. 8; q. 87, a. 2, ad 2; q. 88, a. 3.

²⁰ John Paul II, General Audience, April 2, 1986; emphasis mine.

²¹ Though his position on many aspects of these issues was to evolve, Étienne Gilson provides a poignant remark. "It is because there is causality in nature that we can go back step by step to the first cause, God. In a universe stripped of second causes, the most obvious proofs of the existence of God would be impossible, and His highest metaphysical attributes would remain hidden from us. Inversely, this whole



Still, it seems, the questions persist, and in some ways become more intense, because more focused. How can it be that an intellectual community with the heritage of St. Thomas has remained largely on the sidelines of the ongoing and increasingly important questions of environmental stewardship? Granted that the realist language of formal and final causality had long been challenged within secular scientific circles, why would it not be the case, then, that within Catholic theological circles—indeed Thomist circles—a vigorous environmentalism would not have emerged?

Citing historical causes is a necessarily dangerous endeavor, as the principles are accidental and virtually endless. Nevertheless, it seems not implausible to suggest that yet another reason the Church was reticent to enter the ever growing movement of environmental engagement is that, at the very moment in which created nature was emerging as a reality to be revered and protected (albeit often in a distorted, unthematic way, within secular circles), that same understanding of created nature was diminishing in philosophical and theological circles. More specifically, certain emphases of Catholic thought, certain approaches, among Thomists in particular, that were in the ascendancy at the time of the Second Vatican Council, appear to diminish the significance of the natural order. Indeed, it was the specific emphasis of the *nouvelle* theologians to regard talk of natural ends, especially a natural end of man, as problematic. To be sure, the disputes surrounding the issues of nature and grace were predominantly concerned with the specific conditions of human nature in distinction from lower creation. Nonetheless, without in any way diminishing the theological contributions of these movements, it is not unfair to say that one unintended consequence of these approaches to Saint Thomas was a hyper-critical sensitivity to investing the natural order (lower creation) and man's place within it with too great a teleological or theological significance.²² In seeking to redress what was perceived to be a bias toward the purely natural, an over-correcting

swarm of beings, natures, causes and operations which the universe presents us with, can no long be regarded as existing or acting for itself." Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 184.

²² Steven A. Long, "On the Loss, and the Recovery, of Nature as a Theonomic Principle: Reflections on the Nature/Grace Controversy," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 167; also, *The Teleological Grammar of the Moral Act* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2007). See also Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (New York: Oxford, 2008); Dennis Crawford, "Natural Law and the Body: Deductivism and Parallelism," *Communio* 35 (Fall 2008): 327–53, especially

emphasis on the supernatural end of man seems to have emerged. From the perspective of the traditional parameters of a “philosophy of nature,” psychology appears to have eclipsed cosmology, leaving the necessary anthropological connections to lower creation behind.

“There is nature and nature,” Henri de Lubac asserts, repeatedly emphasizing the distinctive character of the intellectual creature in contrast with “natural beings.”²³ Human “nature” will have “two partially different meanings,” he says, “according to whether it is to be applied to this particular species which we form, among the other species in the universe, or to the nature of spirit in so far as this is something which goes beyond any particular species because it is innately opened to the universal and directly related to God.”²⁴ And though he insists that his position “does nothing to compromise the unity of the human being,” it is not altogether clear that his approach does not strain the unity of the human being in regards to its natural habitat—the created order of material, intelligible creatures. Ironically, a new two-tiered order seems to emerge, not as much between the natural end of man and his supernatural beatitude as between the spiritual nature of man and his natural place within a material cosmos.²⁵ The unity of the human composite, as a substantial being at once spiritual and corporeal set within an ordered, intelligible cosmos, seems compromised.²⁶ While our final destiny points

346–47; Rudolf Voderholzer, *Meet Henri de Lubac* (Fort Collins, CO: Ignatius Press, 2007), 131; also Tracey Rowland, “Natural Law: From Neo-Thomism to Nuptial Mysticism,” *Communio* 35 (Fall 2008): 374–96.

²³ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967) 131, 133, 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁵ As Lawrence Feingold states, “The denial of the possibility of a natural end for man, as is very common today, would take away the foothold in nature for a supernatural extension of happiness through the beatific vision. Paradoxically, the denial of the possibility of a natural end for man would create a kind of “extrinsicism” (!), for it would mean that our supernatural end would not be the superabundant and divine continuation or extension of nature’s proportionate tendency.” See his “Man as *Imago Dei* and *Capax Dei*: Man’s Specific Obediential Potency,” in *Reason and the Rule of Faith: Conversations in the Tradition with John Paul II*, ed. Christopher J. Thompson and Steven A. Long (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2011).

²⁶ Though he will later reject such a notion, Stephen Duffy provides an apt summary of this more “terrestrial” vision of human nature suggested here. “One might,” he says, “understand the concept of pure nature in another way. One might assimilate human nature in all its dimensions to natures, animate or unanimate, that are inferior to it. Each nature is a species. Pure human nature will then refer to humanity insofar as it fully manifests all the characteristics of the natural

toward beatitude, our proximate status as *viatores* is grounded in an intelligible, material, order, and thus the stewardship of creatures to which we are inextricably bound remains one of the principal tasks in this “novitiate on earth.”²⁷

In the period leading up to and immediately surrounding the council, we have the historical confluence of distinct movements within intellectual circles, a confluence which in many ways persists to this day: on the one hand there is the emergence of an environmental awareness among secular circles, circles that long ago abandoned the ancient philosophy of form and finality; and, on the other, there is a reading of the theological tradition among Thomists themselves that appears to backpedal on the questions concerning the meaning and status of created nature. What they share in common, if for different reasons and with varying emphases, is a reading of the human person as existing within a natural setting that is, in itself, theological and philosophically irrelevant. And thus there emerges the unhappy coincidence of the secular movement of a “denatured” environmentalism without a sufficiently robust theological response on the part of the Church. Seen “from below,” from the perspective of the natural sciences, the human person is a creature impelled to steward an environment whose natural *telos* is devoid of divine significance; seen “from above,” from a certain theological vantage point, the human person is a supernaturalized, anomalous being, impelled to eternal beatitude, yet lacking sufficient standing within a natural order. Like two prisoners from two camps who tunnel past each other, they pass in the open field of an eviscerated philosophy of nature, only to end up in disappointment.

beings.” He then later adds, “One cannot deny that by reason of its corporeal dimension humanity does largely share the conditions of the other natures.” My concern here is that we run the risk of denying precisely this point. Through a too zealous front-loading of the natural order with supernatural drama, the natural teleology of created natures, including man, is eclipsed by an over-extended supernaturalism. Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Modern Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier Press, 1992), 42. Moreover, in his excellent survey of the *nouvelle théologie*, Hans Boersma remarks that, according to the *nouvelle* theologians, “God had created the natural world in such a way that at its depth it bore the supernatural stamp of its divine origin and end.” Strike the term “supernatural” from the sentence and nothing seems lost; but much is gained: a preservation of the notion of an intelligible, terrestrial order of ends which leads the searching soul to God as first and final cause, and then, only by grace, the infused soul to that same God as Divine friend. Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

²⁷ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 177.

Many aspects of this situation persist to this day and extend to other areas of theology. In debates concerning the natural law, one encounters approaches to St. Thomas that minimize the importance of the objective natural order and instead champion a vision of the human person's participation in the eternal law as limited to an exercise of practical reason alone.²⁸ Despite protests to the contrary, it is difficult to see such approaches to the natural law as much different from those movements which have struggled to maintain a confidence in a natural teleology.



In conclusion, whether it is the *secular* notion of the human being as a material creature in a theologically neutered environment, or the *theological* notion of the human person as a creature bereft of a natural setting, or the *ethical* notion of the human person as exercising a practical reasoning that is devoid of any speculative roots in objective reality, these approaches all share in common a vision of the human person as a creature devoid of a place within a natural order, a cosmos that would supply the proper context for a theological engagement of creation. Taken as a whole, these approaches more than account for the Church's truncated capacity to evangelize in the arena of environmental stewardship.

In order for us to engage effectively in a new evangelization, several distinct but related claims will need to be re-emphasized: first, a robust defense of a realist philosophy of created natures as formally intelligible and teleologically ordered; also, an account of the human person as a spiritual creature essentially situated within a material cosmos—naturally ordered, supernaturally fulfilled; and finally, a vision of stewardship that elucidates principles to guide the human person's reasonable participation in this theonomically ordered cosmos. These are the outlines of a renewed Thomism, a green Thomism, and it is these features which will underwrite our efforts to evangelize those concerned for the care of the earth.

In concluding, it needs to be admitted that many have already labored to retrieve such a vision. The recent statements of Benedict XVI and of John Paul II, as well as several bishops' statements, can supply a remarkable treasury of wisdom for constructing a positive engagement with the issues. Many of these materials are well known to us all and are gaining in significance.

In particular are the important though less-known efforts of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, whose long tradition of engaging the

²⁸ For an excellent account of various approaches to the meaning and significance of "nature" in natural law ethics, see Matthew Levering's *Biblical Natural Law*, note 22 *supra*.

questions of land stewardship have drawn upon many of the elements that I have raised here today, Thomism in particular.

Their central concern has been, not surprisingly, agriculture and the rural community, but their consistent call for a responsible stewardship has been rooted in something much broader. Agriculture, they argue, cannot escape the normativity of nature. To forget the normativity of created being is to forget one's reason for being.

The history of the origins of sustainable agriculture, the organic food movement, and other environmental practices *within* the Catholic Church is yet to be written, but when it is, I believe it will be discovered that many of the practices now espoused by the most progressive minds of our times were, in fact, voiced in a prior era by those Catholics engaged in the issues of environmental stewardship.²⁹

Long before the *Wilderness Preservation Act* of 1964, before Aldo Leopold penned his classic *Sand County Almanac* in 1948 and launched the environmental movement,³⁰ before E. F. Schumacher drafted *Small is Beautiful* in 1973 and inspired a generation of economic reflection,³¹ before Sigurd Olson's wrote *Listening Point* (1958),³² before Michael Pollan crafted *Second Nature* (1991)³³ and Joel Salatin turned the first shovel of dirt on Polyface Farm,³⁴ before the Organic Consumers Association,³⁵ *Mother Earth News*, and the Slow Food Movement came into being, there was a consistent Catholic community championing the importance of created nature and the imperative to steward it. Thomists who today seek to renew those principles, which for a time seemed to have been lost, can take comfort in knowing that there were intelligent voices of concern, coming from the verdant fields of Catholic stewards, working in the springtime of evangelization, anticipating a perennially green Thomism. N-V

²⁹ Monsignor Luigi Ligutti, *Rural Roads to Security* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1940); George Speltz, *The Importance of Rural Life According to the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003); National Catholic Rural Life Conference, *Manifesto on Rural Life* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1939). Peruse virtually any volume of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference Bulletins during its first few decades and one finds an astonishing sympathy between the views expressed there and some of the most recent advocates for an environmentally sensitive way of life.

³⁰ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine Books, rpt. 1990).

³¹ E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989).

³² Sigurd Olson, *Listening Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, rpt. 1997).

³³ Michael Pollan, *Second Nature* (New York: Grove Press, 2003).

³⁴ www.polyfacefarms.com/.

³⁵ www.organicconsumers.org/.