SACRED EARTH: The Evolution of the Catholic Church’s Teaching on Care for Creation and How Ordinary Catholics Are Hearing the Call

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ABSTRACT

SHEILA READ: Sacred Earth: The Evolution of the Catholic Church’s Teaching on Care for Creation and How Ordinary Catholics Are Hearing the Call
(Under the direction of Jan Johnson Yopp)

Since the mid-twentieth century, the widespread environmental degradation caused by humans’ exploitation of the Earth has attracted increased attention. Environmentalists, scholars and theologians have blamed both Christianity and the scientific-industrial mindset for emphasizing an anthropocentric view that sees the Earth as here to fulfill human needs. In the last 20 years, within Christianity, including the Catholic Church, has been a growing recognition that environmental destruction is a sin, which has led to the birth of a creation care movement. This thesis explores the evolution in the Catholic Church’s public teaching on human responsibility to include caring for the Earth. It looks at how some Catholic communities are responding with innovative projects to the pope’s call to care for the Earth. The thesis also explores the extent to which ordinary Catholics are hearing the call to change their lifestyles and the barriers that affect church leaders’ communication of the message.
To the love of my life, my husband, Cookie Read.
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Introduction

For at least a generation, scientists have been warning that human activity is imperiling the future of the Earth. Advances in technology, once almost universally heralded as hallmarks of human progress, have led to devastating changes in the global environment.

The escalation of burning of fossil fuels and deforestation is changing climate patterns and leading to droughts, heavy storms and more unpredictable weather that threaten agriculture and create refugees. Globalization and industrialization are causing widespread pollution of soil, air and water. Large-scale commercial agricultural practices are resulting in massive erosion of topsoil and depletions in soil fertility. A rapidly increasing global population has led to growing hunger and water scarcity. Habitat destruction and climate change are causing loss of biodiversity in local and regional ecosystems and threaten to cause high rates of extinction of species (Stork, 2010; Wilson, 2006).

How did we get here? Humankind’s ideas about the relationship between people and the natural world have a profound influence on human behavior and have been the subject of scrutiny for decades (White, 1967). Historians have pointed to an attitude of anthropocentrism—or the view that the Earth exists only to serve humans—as the foundation of cultural and individual behaviors that disregard the Earth and its creatures (White, 1967). Both Christianity and the dominant scientific-commercial-industrial mindset of the past two centuries are to blame, scholars have said (Berry, 1988; Petty, 2006; White, 1967).

Historian Lynn White, in his influential 1967 essay, criticized the Judeo-Christian story of creation, where man is seen as made in God’s image and given dominion over all creatures, as laying the intellectual framework that led to humans’ exploitation of nature. Cultural historian and Passionist priest Thomas Berry noted that the scientific revolution of
the 17th century radically changed Western civilization’s concept of humans’ relationship with the Earth (Berry, 1988). Isaac Newton, who established the modern empirical scientific method, compared the Earth to a machine in perpetual motion (Bronowski & Mazlish, 1960). Philosopher Rene Descartes proposed that the universe is made only of mind and mechanism (New World Encyclopedia, 2008). By the 1850s, industry had put into wide practice Francis Bacon’s motto that scientific knowledge leads to technological mastery of nature (White, 1967). This way of thinking had profound consequences for humans’ relationship with the Earth. “As something lifeless and mechanical, something without a soul, nature was something to be dominated and used by human beings” (Petty, 2006, p. 4).

The idea of progress, which has both Christian and cultural roots, has been another major influence on how we treat the Earth. In the U.S. experience especially, the vision of perpetual progress brought about by advancing technology has been a dominant motivation (Berry, 1988). Americans are always in the process of transforming the world into something better, and meanwhile, they tend to resent limitations, Berry said (1988). “Our awareness that life might be other than it is causes a pervasive resentment against the human condition,” Berry wrote (2006, p. 28). “This resentment is what drives our Western historical effort to change the very conditions of life [italics in original] through our scientific technologies” (Berry, 2006, p. 28).

The great irony is that progress in science and technology, thought to be a great good, has resulted in environmental destruction that now threatens the future not only of humans but of much of the life on the planet. Berry saw the destruction caused by technological progress as a tragedy. “Enormous energies have been expended in what has been thought to be beneficial to the larger human process. To realize suddenly that so much of this has been
misdirected, alienating, and destructive beyond anything previously known in human history is a bitter moment indeed,” Berry wrote (1988, p. 159).

**New Responses—Science and Religion**

The birth of the environmental movement has often been dated to the 1962 publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring.* In 1970, Congress passed its first major environmental legislation, the National Environmental Policy Act, and followed that with laws on clean air, clean water and toxic substances (Silecchia, 2004). But as the environmental movement grew in the United States in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Christian churches were largely silent on the issue. “In a period both of church declarations on social issues and of growing secular environmental concern, religious ecological voices were few,” wrote scholar Laurel Kearns. “Thus it became common wisdom that the environment was a secular concern” (Kearns, 1996, p. 55).

That began to change around 1990.

In 1990, the sense of environmental crisis had become so urgent that 34 prominent scientists appealed to religious leaders in an open letter presented at a spiritual leaders conference in Moscow asking for their help in motivating the faithful to make the changes in behavior necessary to save the planet. “We are now threatened by self-inflicted, swiftly moving environmental alterations about whose long-term biological and ecological consequences we are still painfully ignorant—depletion of the protective ozone layer; a global warming unprecedented in the last 150 millennia; the obliteration of an acre of forest every second; the rapid-fire extinction of species; and the prospect of a global nuclear war which would put at risk most of the population of the Earth,” wrote the scientists, who included Carl Sagan, James Hansen and Freeman Dyson (Tucker, 2003, p. 111.) In quasi-
religious language, the scientists said, “Many of us have had profound experiences of awe and reverence before the universe” and emphasized the need for a “vision of the sacred” to motivate efforts to preserve and cherish the Earth (Tucker, 2003, p. 113).

Several hundred religious leaders responded in 1991 by holding a summit with scientists that led to a pledge to communicate with the faithful about appropriate stewardship of creation. The leaders emphasized the need for “moral transformation, as we recognize that the roots of environmental destruction lie in human pride, greed, and selfishness, as well as the appeal of the short-term over the long-term” (Tucker, 2003, p. 119). Shortly thereafter, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment was formed, with the participation of Catholic, Protestant, Christian evangelical and Jewish leaders.

Secular leaders on the environment have continued to call for help from religious leaders. In 2003, the Worldwatch Institute’s State of the World report included a chapter on the importance of religious leadership to the conversion to a sustainable world. In 2006, the esteemed biologist E. O. Wilson wrote The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth, a book in the form of an open letter to a hypothetical Southern Baptist pastor. Wilson said scientists need help from religious leaders because science and religion are two of the most powerful forces in the world, especially in the United States. “If religion and science could be united on the common ground of biological conservation, the problem would soon be solved,” Wilson wrote (2006, p. 5). “If there is any moral precept shared by people of all beliefs, it is that we owe ourselves and future generations a beautiful, rich, and healthful environment” (Wilson, 2006, p. 5).
The Roman Catholic Response

Most of the world’s major religious denominations have made statements urging protection of the environment in the last 10 years (2011, Forum on Religion and Ecology). Because religions are systems of belief that give meaning to life and explain the relationship between God (or gods), humans and the universe, they explicitly or implicitly contain assumptions about the value of the natural world. It is beyond the scope of this thesis, however, to attempt to describe the teachings of the major world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and indigenous religions, and how they relate to ecology.

I have chosen to focus on recent developments in the Roman Catholic Church’s message on the caring for the environment for several reasons. First, the Catholic Church, with 1.16 billion people, represents half the Christians in the world (International Bulletin of Missionary Research, 2011), so it has the potential to influence great numbers of people. In the United States, although 51 percent of the population identifies as Protestant, the Protestant denominations are so fragmented that the Catholic Church remains the largest single denomination, with 24 percent of the population as members (Pew Forum, 2007). Second, the Roman Catholic Church is the oldest Christian church in the West and, as such, bears much of the criticism of those who attack Christianity for contributing to environmental destruction. The last reason is personal. I am a Catholic who, prior to embarking on this research, often wondered whether environmentalism was compatible with my faith; I had not heard preaching in the church I attend about our responsibility to the rest of creation.

Pope John Paul II, who reigned from 1978 until his death in 2005, was the first pope to
write extensive commentaries on global ecological concerns (Silecchia, 2004). Pope John Paul II’s Jan. 1, 1990, World Day of Peace message, called, “Peace With God the Creator, Peace With All of Creation,” was a milestone in religious discourse on the environment (Silecchia, 2004). It made explicit the connection between neglect of moral values and environmental destruction.

In the message, Pope John Paul II emphasized the goodness of God’s creation and the harmony inherent in ecosystems and the cosmos. He reiterated the biblical message that God gave humans dominion over the Earth but said that humans have sinned in misusing God’s gifts. “Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness—both individual and collective—are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence,” Pope John Paul II wrote (1990, para. 8). The pope also called for a conversion in thinking and behavior. “Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style. In many parts of the world, society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause,” he said (Pope John Paul II, 1990, para. 13).

Since his installation in 2005, Pope Benedict XVI has regularly addressed ecological concerns. Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, who in 2009 wrote a book containing Pope Benedict’s statements on caring for creation, said, “Much to the surprise of fans and foes alike, the man who was once seen as ‘God’s Rottweiler’ has quietly, with passionate resolve, spread a message that seems more in keeping with an environmental scientist than a spiritual leader: ‘Save the planet’” (p. 1).

In the last 20 years or so, bishops from many countries have also written exhortations
to the faithful on the subject of caring for the environment. Irish bishops in 2009 wrote a pastoral letter on climate change that called for a “conversion of heart and a change of attitude,” asking believers to use the Christian virtues of “self-control and moderation in the use of material goods” (Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 2009, p. 17).

Much earlier, in 1991, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote a pastoral letter to the faithful called “Renewing the Earth” and followed it with a message on global climate change in 2001 that called for prudent action in responding to the threatened changes. The U.S. bishops also are co-funders of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change (2011), formed five years ago, that seeks to teach Catholics through its writings, workshops and presentations about the moral implications of climate change. The group encourages Catholics to commit to reducing their carbon footprint, or the amount of carbon dioxide emitted into the atmosphere as a result of burning fossil fuels for consumption of food and products, heating and cooling homes, running appliances, transportation, etc.

However, a great deal of difference exists between talk and action. Many observers question whether Catholic faithful have even heard any of the messages, much less acted on them. While mainstream media usually cover major statements by the pope and bishops, I found the articles tended to be short and for the most part did not describe the connection between the statements and the religious beliefs that motivate them. The Catholic media have done a much better job of covering the evolution in the church’s position on its responsibility to care for the Earth, but these publications are read by a very small minority of Catholics (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2011). The average churchgoing Catholic receives guidance on how to live the faith through the priest’s homily at Sunday Mass. For reasons to be discussed later, most priests rarely, if ever, preach on caring for the
environment.

This thesis provides an overview of the Catholic Church’s response to ecological concerns. It discusses the church’s recent statements on caring for creation and addresses whether Catholic laypeople are hearing this message and the barriers to the communication of the message. It also details what leading local churches are doing and profiles a priest who has become an environmental activist, as a way of enhancing understanding of how some Catholics are connecting their faith with environmental responsibility. An alternative story format highlights key statements from church leaders and how they relate in time to major developments on climate change.

**Literature Review**

This literature review covers three main areas: recent evidence of global environmental degradation, the history of Catholic teaching on care for creation, and media coverage of the environment and religion. It also discusses the public’s response to news of widespread environmental problems and the extent to which Catholics are hearing church leaders’ calls to care for the Earth.

A great body of research exists on degradation of the Earth, on topics ranging from global climate change to deforestation, extinction of species, water pollution, toxic waste pollution, acid rain, ozone depletion, soil loss, etc. Veteran Vatican reporter John Allen has identified three areas of particular environmental concern to the Catholic Church: global climate change, water scarcity and deforestation of the Amazon.

**Literature on Environmental Degradation**

**Climate change.**

Global climate change is already occurring, most scientists agree. The cause of global
warming, according to nearly all climatologists, is human burning of fossil fuels for both industrial and personal use (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007). The burning of fossil fuels results in the release into the atmosphere of carbon that for much of the planet’s history has been buried deep underground. Fossil fuels run our factories, power our cars, cool and heat our homes, and produce the electricity that runs our appliances and electronics. So stabilizing or slowing climate change would mean making major changes to the lifestyles to which people who live in wealthy countries have become accustomed.

Environmentalist Bill McKibben, in his 2010 book *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet*, compiled facts from numerous scientific studies that show that the Earth’s climate is already changing—and much faster than predicted. Average global temperatures have increased by 1 degree Celsius (1.8 degrees Fahrenheit) since the mid-1950s (Berkeley Earth Surface Temperature Study, 2011). In summer 2007, the Arctic ice cap shrunk by 1.1 million square miles (12 times the size of Great Britain) to the smallest size ever recorded. Ships were able to navigate channels that had never been opened (McKibben, 2010).

A World Resources Institute review (2011) of the 2009-2010 scientific documentation of global warming showed that 2000-2009 was the warmest decade since recordkeeping began in 1880. Between 1999 and 2008, Swiss alpine glaciers lost as much as 12 percent of their volume. The East Antarctic Ice Sheet may be losing mass more rapidly than predicted. In addition, oceans have acidified by 30 percent, and acidification is occurring much faster than expected (World Resources Institute). Scientists now recognize that acidification affects not only coral reefs but the entire ocean food chain that whales, fish and mollusks depend upon. Wildfires are occurring more frequently in some areas and less frequently in others, in response to changes in precipitation levels and vegetation (World Resources Institute, 2011).
According to the scientific consensus, it is already too late to avert climate change (IPCC, 2007). The only hope is to reduce its impact. Scientists have repeatedly underestimated the pace of climate change (Borenstein, 2011), only to be surprised by evidence such as the rapid melting of the Arctic (McKibben, 2010). For some time, scientists thought that 550 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would lead to irreversible climate change. The renowned climatologist James Hansen in December 2007 revised that estimate to 350 ppm. Current global emissions are already at about 390 ppm and climbing rapidly (CO2 Now, 2011).

In fact, new statistics show that worldwide emissions of greenhouse gases increased by 6 percent in 2010, the largest single-year increase ever recorded (Borenstein, 2011). The level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere now is higher than that in the worst-case scenario predicted four years ago (Borenstein, 2011). Under the worst-case projections, scientists predicted a rise in average global temperature of between 4.3 and 11.5 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century, with a 7.2 degree Fahrenheit increase the most likely (IPCC, 2007).

The United Nations Development Programme has said, “Climate change is the defining human development concern of the 21st century” (2007, para. 1). People in the world’s poorest nations in the tropics and subtropics are more vulnerable to increases in storms, floods and droughts. In many instances, the effects of climate change are already affecting people living in extreme poverty. “The effect that increased droughts, extreme weather events, tropical storms and sea level rises will have on large parts of Africa, on many small island states and coastal zones will be inflicted in our lifetimes,” the report said (United Nations Development Programme, 2007, p. v).
Water scarcity.

The growing scarcity of water is attributable both to climate change and the increasing demand from population growth and economic development, according to a 2009 report by the Pacific Institute. More than 2.4 billion people, or one-third of the global population, live in countries chronically short of water, and that percentage is expected to double to two-thirds by 2025. In recent years, drought caused by climate change has led to water shortages in Australia, Asia, Africa and parts of the United States. The percentage of land worldwide that is classified as “very dry” has doubled since the 1970s and includes large parts of Africa and Australia. Numerous recent scientific studies have documented evidence of more intense and widespread droughts caused by warmer temperatures, changes in precipitation patterns, and melting of glaciers and snowpack. In addition, climate change is a cause of more extreme weather, such as heavier downpours that cause flooding and water contamination from runoff (Pacific Institute, 2009).

In the United States, the Southeast experienced a record drought in 2007-2008. California had a major drought in 2008-2009 that led to drastic restrictions on water use and caused great losses in agriculture. Much of the Southwest began suffering from severe to exceptional drought in 2011 (U.S. Drought Monitor, 2011). Texas is experiencing the worst annual drought on record, which in part set the conditions for the enormous wildfires that in September 2011 destroyed hundreds of homes in central Texas (Parker, 2011; Revkin, 2011). Decreased snowpack in the Rocky Mountains has led scientists to predict that the Lake Mead reservoir, a source of water for millions of people in the Southwest, could dry up by 2021 unless water use is restricted (Pacific Institute, 2009).

The increasing demand for water worldwide is also contributing to water scarcity
Population growth is a major factor: the world population of 7 billion (International Bulletin of Missionary Research, 2011) is projected to increase to 9.2 billion by 2050 (Worldwatch Institute, 2011). Economic development and industrialization also result in greater use of water. And because two-thirds of water use worldwide is for agriculture (Pacific Institute, 2009), water scarcity is already resulting in food shortages. Increased heat and dryness have resulted in the reduction of yields of the staple crops wheat, corn and barley by 40 billion tons annually, the World Wildlife Fund reported in 2008 (McKibben, 2010).

Finally, the quality of water supplies is declining (Pacific Institute, 2009). Drinking water sources are highly contaminated in many developing countries. “In China, many rivers are so badly polluted that not even industry can use the water and nearly two-thirds of the country’s largest cities have no wastewater treatment facilities,” the Pacific Institute said in a 2009 report. Nearly 900 million people worldwide lack access to safe drinking water, and up to 5 million people die every year from water-borne illnesses, according to the report.

**Amazon deforestation.**

The rapid deforestation of the Amazon region is a problem of both local and global concern (Vergara & Scholz, 2011). Twenty million people live in the Amazon River basin, located mainly in Brazil (London & Kelly, 2007), which is largely Catholic. The Amazon rainforest makes up about 30 percent of remaining tropical rainforests worldwide. Its wet, stable climate is home to an enormous variety of plant and animal life, many of which exist nowhere else (London & Kelly, 2007). Since the late 1970s, about 20 percent of the Amazon forest has been cleared. The authors of *The Last Forest* say, “Every year a chunk of land equivalent to an average-size U.S. state disappears from the Amazon” (London & Kelly,
or about 25,000 to 50,000 square kilometers per year (London & Kelly, 2007). Despite laws in Brazil intended to protect the rainforest, it continues to be cleared by cattle ranchers, soybean farmers and poor families seeking plots for subsistence farming.

The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur have an active ministry in the Amazon, living among the poor and fighting against injustice to the poor and destruction of the rainforest. One of its members, Sister Dorothy Stang, who worked in the Amazon for 40 years supporting poor people’s rights to the land and working to protect the rainforest, was shot to death by hired gunmen on Feb. 12, 2005 (DorothyStang.org, 2011).

One concern about the deforestation of the Amazon is the irrevocable loss of plant and animal species, which if significant enough could jeopardize the integrity of the rainforest ecosystem (Vergara & Scholz, 2011). Another major concern is that the old-growth Amazon rainforest plays an important role in the global carbon cycle. The forest processes huge amounts of carbon through respiration and photosynthesis. As the forest is cleared, fewer trees are absorbing carbon from the air, and more deposits of carbon are released into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change. The process is circular: Climate change is thought to place the forest at risk of dieback as drought becomes more likely and precipitation patterns change. The dying of forest would then exacerbate climate change as more carbon is released into the atmosphere and the forest shrinks.

The water cycle would also be affected; the Amazon ecosystem today contributes to about 20 percent of the world’s fresh water. A recent World Bank report concluded, “Amazon forest dieback would be a massive event, affecting all life-forms that rely on this diverse ecosystem, including humans, and producing ramifications for the entire planet”
Public reaction.

In recent years, global warming has been increasingly seen as the top global environmental issue. When asked in 2010 about climate change, a majority of Americans favored legislation to limit emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases (Pew Research Center, 2010a). But most Americans are far more concerned about jobs than the environment. A May 2010 Pew Research Center poll that asked Americans about their views on important priorities for Congress found that only 32 percent ranked legislation on climate change as a top priority, compared to 81 percent who wanted Congress to address the job situation. The same poll also found Americans ranked energy needs, immigration policy and financial regulation as higher priorities than addressing climate change.

One reason for the lack of urgency that Americans express about addressing global warming is the disinformation campaigns led for more than a decade by those who deny that global warming is occurring (Romm, 2007). Despite the nearly universal consensus among scientists that human-caused climate change is occurring and a crisis is looming, the deniers continue to spread the message that global warming is not occurring—or, if it is occurring, it results from a natural climate cycle that humans cannot influence (Romm, 2007). According to Romm, a physicist who authors the influential Climate Progress blog, the disinformation campaign has been led by conservative politicians and a few scientists and think-tanks funded by fossil fuel companies (2007). As a result, the issue of climate change has become highly politicized in the United States. A recent Brookings Report stated, “In the United States an individual’s partisan affiliation is the most important determinant of their views on
the existence of global warming, with Democrats significantly more likely than Republicans to believe that the Earth is warming” (2011, para. 6).

The mass media have played a significant role in giving a platform to global warming deniers. A Boykoff & Boykoff study (2004) of news articles in The New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal found that the dominant news industry practice of quoting people on opposing sides in climate change stories actually resulted in bias. Despite an overwhelming scientific consensus that global warming is real and largely man-made, “balanced reporting has allowed a small group of global warming skeptics to have their views amplified,” Boykoff & Boykoff wrote (2004, p. 127).

History of Catholic Teaching on Care for Creation

Christianity has a rich heritage of teachings on the relationship among God, humans and the natural world. Early Christian and medieval theologians interpreted the natural world as a gift from God, a revelation that leads to knowledge of God, and as having a shared common destiny with humans in salvation at the end of time (Johnson, 1996). These writers often said that God was revealed in two books: the book of Scripture and the book of nature (Johnson, 1996).

Catholic teaching on God as the creator of the cosmos originates in Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible. From the creation story in Genesis come two main themes that continue to inform Catholic teaching on the environment (Silecchia, 2004). First, God made creation and sees it as good. Second, God gave humans a special responsibility to care for creation and exercise “dominion” over it.

The Catholic Church defines creation as including all of heaven and Earth and meaning “all that exists” (United States Catholic Conference, 1994, para. 326). That includes
everything in the universe. In the Nicene Creed, the Christian profession of faith, Catholics profess belief in God as the creator “of all that is, seen and unseen” (United States Catholic Conference, 1994, para. 325).

The Psalms in particular showed an appreciation of nature as both a gift from God and a way to give thanks to God by wondering at the marvels he has created. The writer of Psalm 104 exclaimed, “How varied are your works, Lord! In wisdom you have wrought them all; the Earth is full of your creatures” (*New American Bible*).

Jesus came exhorting people to change their hearts and turn toward God with love, proclaiming a time when humanity would be saved. Importantly, salvation includes not only humanity, but all of creation, which “is groaning in labor pains even until now” (Rom. 8:22).

A knowledge of the land and agriculture informs much of the imagery Jesus used to illustrate his teachings. In Matt 6:24-34, Jesus said to serve and trust God and not money. “Do not worry about your life,” he said, asking his disciples to “look at the birds in the sky” and “learn from the way the wild flowers grow.” Jesus used imagery of caring for animals and plants in referring to himself and God the Father. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote: “Jesus himself is the Good Shepherd, who gives his life for his flock (see John 10). His Father is a vineyard worker, who trims vines so that they may bear more abundant fruit (see John 15:1-8). These familiar images, though they speak directly to humanity's encounter with God, at the same time reveal that the fundamental relation between humanity and nature is one of caring for creation” (USCCB, 1991, para. 45).

In addition, the Christian belief in Christ’s incarnation as the Word of God made flesh has profound consequences for the view of the natural world. If one believes that God chose to become human in the form of Jesus Christ, that implies the sanctity of the interconnected
Many of the church fathers and saints also contributed to Catholic thinking on the relationship among God, nature and humans. St. Augustine wrote lyrically about the ways in which all elements of nature and all creatures give praise to God (Schaefer, 2009). He taught respect for all creatures, even those that inconvenience humankind. St. Thomas Aquinas taught “that God created living and nonliving entities in an orderly relationship with one another to achieve their common good” (Schaefer, 2009, p. 22). According to Aquinas, the harmony and wholeness of creation is a manifestation of God’s goodness. St. Francis of Assisi, perhaps the most beloved of all Catholic saints, had such a deep connection with nature that he is portrayed as preaching to birds and wolves. In St. Francis’ well-known “Canticle of Brother Sun,” all of creation praises God, and the sun, moon, wind and water are our brothers and sisters: “Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Mother Earth, who sustains us and governs us and who produces varied fruits with colored flowers and herbs.”

**Anthropocentrism and focus on salvation.**

Despite the rich Catholic tradition of seeing manifestations of God in nature and viewing humans as part of the harmonious integrity to creation, those messages became obscured over time. Thomas Berry noted that after the invention of the printing press in the 16th century, the idea of God being revealed in nature declined as people focused more on the written word (Berry, 2006). Johnson (1996) said that after the Protestant Reformation, both the Catholic Church and Protestant churches focused more on the relationship between God and the individual, neglecting the relationship with the natural world, for reasons that have not been adequately studied. One reason might have been that leaders of the Catholic Church, who at the time interpreted Scripture literally, could not figure out how to reconcile the
Bible’s assumption of the Earth’s centrality in the universe with the emerging scientific understanding of the cosmos, Johnson said (1996).

After the Vatican II reforms in the 1960s, the Catholic Church turned toward greater engagement with the modern world and interfaith leaders. But this direction took the church further from its ancient understanding of the importance of the natural world, according to Johnson (1996). Protestant theology was preoccupied with man’s sinfulness and the salvation offered by Christ and had become highly anthropocentric, Johnson said (1996).

It is widely recognized that anthropocentrism is at the core of human destruction of the environment (Berry, 1988; Miller, 2010; Petty, 1996; Tucker, 2003; White, 1967; Wilfred, 2009). Anthropocentrism is the view that the universe exists to serve human ends and can be interpreted only through human experiences of reality. Both Christianity and the culture of secular materialism share responsibility for cultivating a human-centered view of the Earth, many scholars have argued. In the case against Christianity, the main criticisms are that Christianity has promoted the idea that humans are superior to and have license to rule all creatures and that by focusing on “salvation” out of the material world, Christian teaching has led to the undervaluing of the Earthly world.

In 1967, historian Lynn White provoked much debate with his essay arguing that Christianity provided the intellectual root of the Western view of nature as something to be exploited for human benefit. The issue here is the interpretation of the creation story in Genesis as giving humans “dominion” over all creatures. “Christianity … not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (White, 1967, p. 1205).

In his 1988 book, *The Dream of the Earth*, Berry said that Christian churches had been
ineffective, at best, or indirectly supportive, at worst, of the American assault on the environment. Berry gave several reasons for the failure of Christian religions to address environmental destruction. One major reason is the Christian view of God as transcendent to the natural world. That viewpoint, when oversimplified, can lead to a dualistic division between the spiritual and the material, in which the divine is sought in the spiritual “other-world,” to the negation of the value of the material world. In the Christian tradition, God can also be viewed as immanent in the natural world, as many mystical writers have emphasized, but this viewpoint has tended to be neglected within Christianity (Wilfred, 2009).

To Berry and others, another problematic Christian teaching is the emphasis on resurrection and the idea that we are spiritual beings with an eternal destiny in heaven, a special destiny not shared by creatures, to whom we are superior (Berry, 1988; Miller, 2010). This view led to alienation from the natural world.

Some writers, while acceding to some of the charges against Christianity, say that they have been exaggerated. Theologian Felix Wilfred says that the Western enlightenment was the root of anthropocentric thinking, in that it taught humans to use their creativity to seek freedom from the biological constraints of the natural world.

“The truth is that the Christianity that is blamed is a Christianity interpreted through the enlightenment anthropocentrism of the West, which fostered disenchantment with nature as a mark of progress and of secular humanism. Christianity and Christian heritage were one-sidedly interpreted to produce the project of the Western Enlightenment and were in turn profoundly influenced by it” (Wilfred, 2009, p. 50).

Bergant agreed that the idea that the Bible itself is anthropocentric might have been overemphasized. Much of the interpretation that influenced the way we understand the Bible today was done during the 19th century, when optimism about the ability of science and technology to bring about human progress prevailed, Bergant noted. “Exaggerated
anthropocentrism was in its glory. Everything was judged from the perspective of its value to human progress. Most likely, this point of view was read into many biblical texts” (Miller, 2010, p. 36).

Still, the Catholic Church and Christianity can be fairly criticized for neglecting the doctrine of creation and emphasizing the doctrine of salvation for most of its history (O’Keefe, 2010; Petty, 1996; U.S. Catholic, 2008). Anne Clifford, professor in interreligious studies at John Carroll University, said that over time, creation “became simply the stage upon which human salvation is worked out. In effect we say, ‘We will use the Earth for what we need to sustain our human life so that we can travel our personal spiritual journey to God’” (U.S. Catholic, 2008, para. 16-17).

**Modern Roman Catholic thinking.**

One thing is clear. Like other major religions, the Catholic Church had little, if anything, to say about global ecological issues until late in the twentieth century, when widespread environmental problems began to become a major public concern. Since then, a Catholic environmental ethic has been developing, begun with Pope John Paul II and advanced by Pope Benedict XVI, who has consistently spoken out on the environmental crisis and the need for a moral response.

The most authoritative documents in the Catholic Church’s social teaching are papal encyclicals. Perhaps the first pope to warn of destruction of the environment was Pope Paul VI in the encyclical *Eighty Years*, written in 1971. (To put that in context, the first major U.S. law creating an environmental policy was enacted in 1970). “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation,” Pope Paul VI wrote (1971, para. 21).
Pope John Paul II touched on environmental concerns in his first encyclical, The Redeemer of Man, in 1979, expressing concern about the “exploitation of the Earth” (para. 15), people’s growing alienation from nature and the rise of a “consumer civilization” (para. 16). In 1987, Pope John Paul II made what many commentators saw as the first comprehensive papal statement on the environment in the encyclical On Social Concerns (Silecchia, 2004).

Silecchia said the greatest contribution of this encyclical to the development of church thinking was the delineation of three ecological principles. First, Pope John Paul II (1987) identified limits to natural resources and said that humans’ abuse of the dominion over creation given to them by God endangers future generations. Second, he emphasized the interconnectedness of all created beings in the cosmic order and said that humans cannot use them with impunity. This emphasis on interconnection of ecosystems, a main focus of the teaching of environmental science in the last 60 years, marked a first in a papal document (Silecchia, 2004). Finally, Pope John Paul II wrote of the risks that come with development, including industrial pollution.

Two years later, in his 1990 World Day of Peace Message, Pope John Paul II linked the environmental crisis with a crisis in morality. He celebrated the goodness of creation, reiterated that God gave humans dominion over the Earth, and lamented that sinful use of that dominion is hurting both people and ecosystems.

“The most profound and serious indication of the moral implications underlying the ecological problem is the lack of respect for life evident in many of the patterns of environmental pollution. Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while 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 and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.

On another level, delicate ecological balances are upset by the uncontrolled
destruction of animal and plant life or by a reckless exploitation of natural resources” (Pope John Paul II, 1990, para. 7).

Pope John Paul II also repeatedly criticized individual lifestyles and called for an ecological conversion of heart.

“Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style. In many parts of the world society is given to instant gratification and consumerism while remaining indifferent to the damage which these cause … If an appreciation of the value of the human person and of human life is lacking, we will also lose interest in others and in the Earth itself. Simplicity, moderation and discipline, as well as a spirit of sacrifice, must become a part of everyday life, lest all suffer the negative consequences of the careless habits of a few” (Pope John Paul II, 1990, para. 13).

Although Pope John Paul II significantly advanced church teaching on ecological issues, Pope Benedict XVI has addressed environmental issues more regularly and has shown a deep commitment to awakening people’s consciences on their responsibility to care for the Earth (Koenig-Bricker, 2009). Pope Benedict made his first serious call to care for creation in an August 2006 address (Koenig-Bricker, 2009). Since then, he has repeated his ecological message in speeches, homilies and private meetings with groups, including world youth, scientists, seminarians, world leaders and ordinary Catholics (Koenig-Bricker, 2009).

On the issue of global warming and energy use, Benedict has been leading by example. Under his leadership, the Vatican in 2007 became the first carbon-neutral state in Europe and aims to get 20 percent of its power from renewable energy sources by 2020. The Vatican also installed 2,400 solar panels on the roof of its audience hall, saving an estimated 225 tons of carbon dioxide emissions and 80 tons of oil per year. The Vatican under Pope Benedict has also released Ten Commandments for the Environment, a list of principles to guide ethical decision-making (Koenig-Bricker, 2009).

On Jan. 1, 2010, Pope Benedict made perhaps his most extensive statement on humans’
responsibility to care for the Earth in his World Day of Peace Message called “Peace With God the Creator, Peace With All Creation.” At the time of this literature review, this statement was Pope Benedict’s latest major papal message on the environment, and its key themes are worth reviewing for purposes of this thesis.

**Grounding in God, love and responsibility.**

A key theme of Pope Benedict’s message was an emphasis on God’s love. God created the world in love and made a covenant with human beings that if they live with faith and love, they will share an eternal destiny. The way humans treat the environment “should mirror the creative love of God, from whom we come and towards whom we are journeying,” Pope Benedict wrote (2010, para. 1). “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” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010, para. 2). Nature has an intrinsic value and can lead people to further knowledge of God. “Contemplating the beauty of creation inspires us to recognize the love of the Creator, that Love which ‘moves the sun and the other stars,’” the pope said (2010, para. 2).

Pope Benedict emphasized that as creatures of God, humans are called to live in harmonious relationship with the rest of the universe. As Pope John Paul II pointed out, a lack of due respect for nature resulting from human sin has resulted in an ecological crisis. Humans have a vocation as stewards of God’s creation but have misinterpreted what it means to have dominion over creation, Pope Benedict wrote. Rather than seeing stewardship as responsibility to care for what ultimately belongs to God, humans succumbed to pride and the exercise of power. “Human beings let themselves be mastered by selfishness; they misunderstood the meaning of God’s command and exploited creation out of a desire to
exercise absolute domination over it,” Pope Benedict said (2010, para. 6).

He explained:

“Everything that exists belongs to God, who has entrusted it to man, albeit not for his arbitrary use. Once man, instead of acting as God’s co-worker, sets himself up in place of God, he ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature, ‘which is more tyrannized than governed by him.’ Man thus has a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it” (2010, para. 6).

Selfishness and negligence on the part of some, especially those in power in wealthy, developed countries, are leading to the suffering of large numbers of people worldwide, Benedict wrote.

*A new moral framework for development.*

The widespread overexploitation of resources unfairly harms poor people and less developed nations, while also jeopardizing the lives of future generations. Pope Benedict called for a new moral framework to guide development, based on the idea of solidarity with others who share life on Earth, both now and in future generations. In essence, his call for solidarity was another way of reiterating Jesus’ commandment to “love your neighbor.” Benedict wrote, “I would advocate the adoption of a model of development based on the centrality of the human person, on the promotion and sharing of the common good, on responsibility, on a realization of our need for a changed life-style, and on prudence, the virtue which tells us what needs to be done today in view of what might happen tomorrow” (2010, para. 9).

Science and technology can help us learn to manage the environment and resources better, Pope Benedict said. But technology must be used with proper perspective. Technology must be used in a way that reflects God’s creative love and responds to his command to care for the Earth.
Call for a change in lifestyles.

Pope Benedict, like his predecessor Pope John Paul II, also called individuals to change consumerist lifestyles in favor of lifestyles oriented toward serving God and based on values of truth, goodness and love.

“It is becoming more and more evident that the issue of environmental degradation challenges us to examine our life-style and the prevailing models of consumption and production, which are often unsustainable from a social, environmental and even economic point of view. We can no longer do without a real change of outlook which will result in new life-styles, ‘in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments’” (Pope Benedict XVI, 2010, para. 11).

Christians are called to contribute to God’s creative work by contemplating the beauty of creation, working to create justice and peace on Earth, and trusting in God’s final redemption of all creation. Christians have a duty to cherish the Earth, he noted. “Protecting the natural environment in order to build a world of peace is … a duty incumbent upon each and all,” Pope Benedict said (2010, para. 14).

Comparing the Catholic and environmentalist messages.

The Catholic message on the environment has much in common with the views of environmentalists, as well as some important differences. Some of the similarities include an emphasis on the appreciation of nature’s beauty and intrinsic value; concern for improving human health by protecting soil, air and water; a focus on sustainable lifestyles and concern for future generations; and a recognition of the interdependence of human life with the ecosystems of which it is a part. Unlike fundamentalist Christian churches, the Catholic Church teaches that the scientific theory of evolution is compatible with belief in God (Pope John Paul II, 1996).

A key difference with secular environmentalists, however, is that Catholics believe that
God created the world. God is both in the world and transcends the world. So while Catholics may see manifestations of God in the beauty of mountains, streams, birds and flowers, they recognize that nature is not God. Pope Benedict has spoken out against pantheism, or the tendency to worship nature itself as if it were divine (2010a). For example, some Native American worship practices, as well as some forms of Taoism and Buddhism, resemble pantheism (Frankenberry, 2011).

Pope Benedict XVI has made it clear that the church’s position occupies a middle ground between two extremes (2010a). At one extreme, some absolutize nature, risking ending up “considering it more important than the human person,” while at the other extreme are those who “absolutize technology and human power,” which “results in a grave assault not only on nature, but also on human dignity itself” (2010, para. 13). To Pope Benedict, stewardship of creation reveals the nature of humans’ relationship with God. “There exists a certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us,” the pope stated (2010, para. 13).

Additionally, the Catholic Church has refused to consider population control as a solution to environmental problems. Pope John Paul II made explicit the Catholic Church’s teaching that population control is not the answer to environmental problems. This position continues to be controversial and is one major way in which the church’s teaching on ecology differs from that of secular environmentalists (Silecchia, 2004).

Another, more subtle difference is that the Catholic Church makes explicit an interconnection between how people treat one another and how they treat the Earth. The church makes human dignity central—if people treat their neighbor with love, they will treat all created beings with love.
The most essential difference might be that a believer who sees the wonder of nature as a reflection of God is motivated by love of God and gratitude to respect creation. Some secular environmentalists, while they might write lyrically about the beauty of nature, also seem motivated by fear. Bill McKibben, one of the most prolific environmental writers, in his latest book *Eaarth*, gave example after example showing that global warming is already happening. “Don’t let your eyes glaze over at this parade of statistics …” he wrote. “These should come as body blows, as mortar barrages, as sickening thuds” (McKibben, 2010, p. 5). Keith Warner, a Franciscan priest and environmental activist, said in an interview in *U.S. Catholic*: “I think that so many people are repelled by the secular movement because they see it as driven by anger, not love. It makes people feel guilty rather than grateful and energized” (2010, para. 13).

**Related views on Earthly stewardship.**

Of course, the emerging Catholic thinking on ecology does not satisfy all believers. Some Catholic eco-theologians believe that the church should abandon the Genesis notion of dominion in favor of a relationship of communion between humans and all of creation. The late Thomas Berry was an influential proponent of this view, which continues to be promoted by many, including Berry’s protégé, Mary Evelyn Tucker, who founded the Forum on Religion and Ecology. He called for the integration of scientists’ understanding of the evolution of the universe with the spiritual understanding of Christianity (Berry, 2006).

Berry urged a reawakening of the sense of the sacredness of nature. He promoted a radical rethinking of social institutions to fit with the new understanding of the interdependence of all beings, both material and non-material, and to recognize that humans are not central in nature. For example, laws should reflect not only crimes against humans
but crimes against the environment. Also, he said an ecological education for all is essential to understand human limitations and how humans fit in with the rest of the natural world. Ironically, it is humankind’s attempts to transcend biological limitations and prolong their individual survival that have resulted in endangering the life of the planet, Berry said.

“Each individual life-form has its own historical appearance, a moment when it must assert its identity, fulfill its role, and then give way to other individuals in the ever-renewing processes of the phenomenal world. In our Western tradition, this passing of our own being is experienced as something to be avoided absolutely. Because we are so sensitive to any personal affliction, because we avoid any threats to our personal existence, we dedicate ourselves to individual survival above all else. In the process of extending the limits of our own lives, we imperil the community of life systems on the planet” (Berry, 2006, p. 35).

Berry has had a major influence on many, including communities of religious sisters. Miriam Therese MacGillis, a Dominican sister, founded an organic community farm called Genesis Farm in Blairstown, New Jersey, to help others reconnect to the Earth and educate people about the new cosmology. Berry’s thinking also influenced the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary when they decided to do a green renovation of their motherhouse in Monroe, Michigan. The sisters sought to lead by example and teach others about the interconnection between all forms of life and the need to use resources wisely (Sheehan, 2007).

Are Catholics Hearing the Message?

Despite strong statements by Pope Benedict XVI on the duty of Catholics to care for the Earth, few Catholics appear to be hearing the message. A major reason is that few priests have taken up the cause.

In an article in *U.S. Catholic* (2010), Franciscan friar Keith Warner said that parish priests have been noticeably absent from the environmental movement within the church for several reasons. The shortage of priests means greater demands on their time. Also, the
environmental movement in the church is relatively new, and most priests have not been trained to teach new things (U.S. Catholic, 2010).

Anne Clifford of Interreligious Studies at John Carroll University told *U.S. Catholic* (2008) that “the person in the pew is not hearing anything about ecology as a commitment to creation at Sunday liturgies.” The reason, she said, is that the story of creation only comes up twice each year in the choice of readings for Sunday Mass and then at times (the first Sunday of Lent and Holy Saturday) when the focus of the Mass is elsewhere. On the first Sunday of Lent, the focus is on the sin of Adam and Eve as Catholics prepare for six weeks of repentance and atonement. On Holy Saturday, Catholics celebrate the Easter Vigil as they await Christ’s return, and the Mass emphasizes the themes of man’s sin, God’s redeeming mercy and love, and God’s new creation in Christ. “At neither time would it be appropriate for the homilist to challenge the common notion that Earth was made for human use,” Clifford said (U.S. Catholic, 2008, para. 13).

Within the church, bishops have the responsibility to be visionary leaders, but only a few U.S. bishops have taken the lead in their dioceses on the issue of the environment. Notable bishops who have spoken out on caring for the environment include the Northwest bishops on the Columbia River watershed, the Appalachian bishops on sustainable communities, and the New Mexico bishops on water pollution and hazardous wastes.

A 2008 *U.S. Catholic* editorial said, “There is little reason to believe that Catholics exert any more effort than the rest of the citizenry at becoming creation-friendly” (Cones, para. 4). Miller identifies four reasons why many Americans, including Catholics, remain indifferent to projections of climate change (2010). First, most people are not yet directly experiencing effects of climate change. Second, oil and coal companies are funding
disinformation campaigns. Third, global warming has become a partisan political issue in the United States, unlike most other developed countries, which do not dispute that climate change is occurring. Finally, the media have done a poor job of reporting on the science of climate change, with most reporters acting simply as stenographers and most editors failing to make global warming an important beat (Miller, 2010).

**Media Coverage**

The environmental beat in mass media organizations faces numerous challenges. With the exception of disasters, the nature of most environmental problems is unobtrusive and complex (Cox, 2010). Problems that don’t have dramatic visuals and whose development is incremental in nature, like global warming or pollution that comes from multiple sources, tend to be under-covered compared to events such as an oil spill, which has strong visual elements and is tied to the 24-hour daily news cycle (Cox, 2010). To cover environmental problems and their implications adequately, reporters need knowledge of science, government policy, economics, business practices, health effects and civil rights (Kriz, 2002). And after several years in which news organizations have experienced numerous layoffs, institutional knowledge has been lost, and reporters covering the environment are stretched thin, leading to gaps in scrutiny.

The religion beat faces similar problems with regard to staffing. Religion began to become a regular beat at news organizations in the late 1970s, following the election to president of born-again evangelical Jimmy Carter and the rise to power of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran (Buddenbaum, 1998). But the religion beat has historically been considered expendable in most mass media (Buddenbaum, 1998), and religion writers remain a tiny minority in the newsroom (Beckerman, 2004). Recently, financial challenges have prompted
cutbacks in religion coverage in several newspapers, which eliminated religion sections and cut religion editor or reporter positions (Pulliam, 2007).

Dominant news values also have negatively affected mass media coverage of religion. To cover religion well, a reporter requires specialized knowledge. It is much easier to fall back on traditional news values of conflict, oddity and event-based coverage when journalists’ pressured daily routines make it difficult to understand religion in depth (Willey, 1996). Shrinking news holes also make it more difficult to write complex religion stories.

Another important factor affecting religious coverage is the clash between the typical worldviews of journalists and religious believers, Beckerman (2004) said. “Journalism is grounded in this world and embodies a belief that everything can be known. On the other hand is religion, which is fundamentally about mystery and the unknown. Faith is grounded in this notion, that we surrender ourselves to greater powers beyond our reach,” Beckerman said. Willey also noted that journalists tend to value the concrete over the abstract and report facts, not opinions and beliefs (Willey, 1996). But without describing religious people’s underlying beliefs and motivations, coverage remains shallow. In addition, religion, based in faith in age-old concepts, has a hard time meeting the limited definition of news as something that happened yesterday or will happen tomorrow (Beckerman, 2004). With this background, it’s easier to understand why critics have complained that news coverage is biased against religion and that coverage is inaccurate and shallow (Buddenbaum, 1998).

With the pressures facing journalists on both the religion and environmental beats, it is not surprising that the mainstream media coverage of the emerging Catholic message on ecology has been minimal and largely superficial. For this thesis, I reviewed articles written on Christianity and the environment in *The New York Times, Washington Post, Newsweek*
and *U.S. News & World Report* in the last 20 years. I selected these publications for review because of their prestige and also ease of access to their searchable databases.

*The New York Times* neglected to write about Pope Benedict’s seminal message on Jan. 1, 2010, about believers’ responsibility toward the environment, called “If You Want Peace, Protect Creation.” Major speeches by Pope Benedict XVI tend to be covered by the newspaper in a routine way as if they were political rallies, with little description of the religious motivation underlying them or the implications for believers. For example, in a recent article on a speech by Pope Benedict in Madrid, Spain, for World Youth Day, *The New York Times* included just one vague quote from the pope criticizing the secularization of society and contained no description of faith issues discussed by the pope (Minder, 2011). On May 6, 2011, *The New York Times* covered a Vatican report on global warming that warned of risks to people and ecosystems (Morello). But it followed up the report four days later with an article titled, “Vatican Report Shines Light on Divisions in U.S. Faith Community,” (Chemnick, 2011) that focused on conflict between extreme positions rather than consensus, thus confusing the moral issue and making it difficult to discern different denominations’ overall views. The combined effect of gaps in scrutiny, the focus on political rather than religious implications of Catholic leaders’ remarks, and emphasis on controversy makes it difficult for readers to understand the church’s message to the faithful on ecology.

News magazines have not done much better in coverage of the Catholic message on the environment. *Newsweek* in 2008 dubbed Pope Benedict the “Green Pope,” mentioning the Vatican’s effort to go carbon-neutral (Stone, 2008). But the article failed to articulate the pope’s religious rationale for going green and instead devoted space to observers’ pragmatic speculations about the pope’s motives. *U.S. News & World Report* wrote several articles on
the greening of religion between 1989 and 1997, but since that time its coverage of the subject diminished.

In the last several years, mainstream media have devoted more attention to the movement led by some evangelical churches to care for creation. But the articles have tended to focus on conflicts and controversies between different church leaders, which makes it difficult to discern a consistent message or understand the religious leaders’ thinking in any depth.

Niche media—more specifically, the Catholic media—have done a much better job of covering the church’s message on the environment, both more often than the mainstream media and in greater depth. That is likely because Catholic news organizations consider it part of their mission to explain the elements of faith and how they connect to the lives of Catholics. Catholic News Service, for example, does a good job of summarizing statements made by the pope and other church leaders. Other publications, such as the National Catholic Reporter, have written many short features on what individual Catholic churches or religious communities are doing to demonstrate concern for the environment. U.S. Catholic in March 2010 ran a lengthy article on what many parishes around the country are doing to go green. In the last 10 years, the Jesuit publication America has written several in-depth articles on the changing theology on ecology and spirituality.

Although Catholic media coverage of the church’s position on ecology has generally been more frequent and in greater depth than that of the mass media, few Catholics read these niche publications. In a recent survey, the percentage of Catholics who reported reading popular Catholic publications at least once every three months ranged from less than 1 percent to 9 percent, depending on the publication (Center for Applied Research in the
Apostolate, 2011). Less than 2 percent of Catholics read any single Catholic publication even occasionally, with the exception of Catholic Digest.

One major gap seems to be evident in the coverage by the Catholic media. Probably the largest omission is the failure to address whether ordinary lay Catholics are hearing the church’s environmental message and are changing their lifestyles in response. The focus instead is on what church leaders are saying and what leading communities are doing. This approach leaves out the vast majority of lay Catholics and ordinary parishes and could create a distorted picture of the extent to which Catholics are taking to heart the call to ecological conversion.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

Because of the perceived lack of coverage of how the Catholic message of ecology is being explained and is reaching Catholics, this thesis sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the context for and current teaching of the Catholic Church on the subject of humans’ responsibility to care for creation?

2. How are individual Catholics hearing and responding to the message that environmental responsibility is part of a life of faith? What are the factors interfering with hearing and acting on the message?

3. What are the messages that priests are preaching about caring for creation? If they are not doing so, why not?

4. What are local churches in the Diocese of Raleigh doing to demonstrate and teach a commitment to care for the Earth?

Two news articles, one profile and a timeline in alternative story format address these
questions. The articles were informed by the literature review discussed above and also included more than 50 interviews with ordinary Catholics, experts in academia, lay leaders, priests and others in religious life. An overview article addresses whether Catholic laypeople are hearing church teaching on care for creation and the barriers to the communication of the message. Another article discusses the example of leading churches in the Diocese of Raleigh who have active environmental ministries. A third article profiles a priest who is an environmental activist. Finally, a timeline in Appendix A highlights key statements from church leaders and how they relate in time to major developments on climate change.

I expect the articles to appeal to Catholics, Christians and people with an interest in the environment and to be appropriate for publication in a national newspaper such as the Washington Post or national Catholic publications such as U.S. Catholic, St. Anthony Messenger, Commonweal, or America. The article on churches in the Raleigh diocese may appeal to The News & Observer in Raleigh or the diocesan publication NC Catholics.
CHAPTER TWO

Catholics Aren’t Hearing the Message of Care for Creation

Stewardship of the environment is part of the duty of Catholics, say Pope Benedict XVI and bishops around the world. They are calling on the faithful to act with prudence and make choices to reduce energy consumption to prevent the worst with climate change.

But despite a consistent message from the Vatican, the vast majority of Catholics—whether clergy or laity—say they haven’t heard about a responsibility to care for creation, and as a result, efforts of individual parishes are sporadic and slow to take hold.

“Very, very few people have heard a Catholic perspective on the environment,” said Rob Breen, director of the Franciscan Ecology Center at Siena College in Loudonville, N.Y., who for years has conducted workshops on the subject.

“It’s not a message that’s getting through to the laity,” said Sr. Patricia Siemen, executive director of the Center for Earth Jurisprudence in Miami Shores, Fla.

While the Catholic position on the responsibility to care for creation is not new, it has been articulated in more detail since Pope John Paul II began speaking out on the subject. In a 1990 address, he linked the ecological crisis with a crisis in morality and called for a conversion of hearts and an adoption of simpler lifestyles.
Messages From the Bishops

In 2001, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops said in a pastoral letter, “The virtue of prudence is paramount” in acting on global warming. “In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed.”

In 2006, the conference of U.S. bishops contributed funding to create the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change. The coalition seeks to educate U.S. Catholics on the connections between their energy consumption, global climate change, and the effect on the poor and vulnerable. The “Who’s under your carbon footprint?” campaign asks people to take action by taking a pledge, known as the St. Francis Pledge.

The campaign emphasizes the virtue of prudence as well as Catholic social teaching on caring for the poor and seeking the common good. “There’s nothing more common for all of humanity than the climate, the air that we live in and breathe and that impacts our weather and is now threatened,” said Dan Misleh, executive director of the coalition.

Poor people in developing nations in the tropics and subtropics are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, as storms and floods destroy crops, livestock and homes and droughts cause famine.

“The people who will be most impacted from climate change are those with least resources and least ability to adapt to it. The sad truth is those who contributed the least to climate change will suffer the most,” Misleh said.

Perhaps the strongest statement on climate change associated with the Vatican came in a document published on May 11, 2011, by the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences. “Human-caused changes in the composition of the air and air quality result in more than 2 million premature deaths worldwide every year and threaten water and food security –
especially among those ‘bottom 3 billion’ people,” the document says. It calls for immediate political action.

In his 2009 encyclical “Charity in Truth,” Pope Benedict XVI said, “The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.” The pope also wrote, “The protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly … promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet.

The Catholic Coalition’s Misleh noted: “We take as a starting point that our actions, our consumption of energy in particular, has impact around the globe. If we adopt simpler lifestyles, we’ll save money, clean up the planet, find time for things that really matter.”

What Catholics Are—or Aren’t—Hearing

Most laypeople interviewed said they were unaware that church leaders had made statements about environmental stewardship and would be interested in hearing more at church about caring for creation. Greg Zapotoczny, a biology graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill who attends daily Mass, said: “It’s a very important issue. We should take care of the environment. It’s given by God, so we should maintain it as part of God’s creation.”

Barbara Pegg, director of faith formation at UNC-Chapel Hill’s Newman Center Parish, said that the widespread ignorance of Catholic social teaching might be because most Catholic catechesis stops in the eighth grade when children receive the sacrament of confirmation. “We have about a seventh or eighth grade I.Q. for theology and life in the world. And in seventh or eighth grade, while you’re making connections, you also have a worldview that’s pretty narrow,” Pegg said.
Sue Concannon, who is active in environmental ministry at Immaculate Conception Church, Durham, N.C., agrees that most Catholics are unaware of church teaching on care for creation. “Intuitively people understand it, but if you go back to the Genesis text about God giving man dominion over the earth, some view that as a mandate to exploit the earth instead of tend and keep it. The original meaning is to take care of, to nurture,” she said.

Catholics tend to get their information on church teaching at church. But most Catholics interviewed said they had not heard a homily in which a priest mentioned environmental stewardship.

In interviews, priests cited several reasons they don’t preach about care for creation. A big factor is lack of information on current church teachings on the subject and on the technicalities of environmental issues.

Understanding the connection between humans and the natural world requires scientific and theological education that is often lacking. “I don’t think seminaries are teaching much on environmental theology or even on understanding our biblical tradition in caring for the environment,” Siemen said.

Breen of Siena College noted: “Our understanding of the science and the integration of social science and human health and social issues is a relatively new way of understanding these problems of the way the world works. We’ve never had this understanding within the church.”

The connection between human activities and their effect on often-distant ecosystems and peoples is difficult to make without help. “No one recognizes really that environmental issues are also anti-poverty issues, also life issues,” Breen said. “Anytime you contaminate an ecosystem, the people that get it first are the poor and the marginalized.”
Another reason Catholics aren’t hearing about caring for creation from the pulpit is that pastors often are overworked and lack the time to assimilate complicated new issues. “As the number of priests decrease and one man is head of two parishes, he barely has time to keep his head above water,” said Rev. David McBriar, associate pastor at St. Francis of Assisi in Raleigh, who often preaches on care for creation. “Reading these things and being concerned about them is sort of an add-on rather than a central part of [a priest’s] awareness.”

Monsignor John Wall, pastor at the Newman Catholic Student Center Parish at UNC-Chapel Hill, acknowledged that while he is aware that theologians and the popes have made statements on caring for creation, he doesn’t know much about the writings. “There’s 50 different areas the church is into, so I think there’s always a learning curve in regard to church teaching,” Wall said.

Priests also are expected to preach on the Scripture readings of the day, which are contained in the lectionary developed by the Vatican and rarely explicitly address caring for creation.

Rev. Jacek Orzechowski, a Franciscan friar at St. Camillus in Silver Spring, Md., is an exception. He said he often weaves environmental justice into homilies and seeks to mobilize the faithful to take action on climate change.

“Do we take seriously the voices of the overwhelming majority of responsible scientists?” Orzechowski said. “They say the struggle is over saving civilization. When one looks seriously at science with the virtue of prudence, it’s almost suicidal the path we are on.”

But he also recognized that he is on a leading edge in the church. “Change happens slow,” Orzechowski said. “Even among priests and the religious, this is something that was not part of people’s background or formation, the care for creation. One might presume they
would be sensitive to issues surrounding environmental justice, but it sometimes doesn’t quite connect.”

**Seeking More Leadership**

McBriar and many others within the church who are passionate about engaging Catholics on environmental stewardship expressed disappointment at what they perceived as a lack of leadership from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“Bishops have a lot of power in the Catholic Church,” McBriar said. “If they ever got together on an issue, like they did on abortion, about climate change and responsibility for the earth, they could do a great deal.”

Breen said that bishops have been divided on the issue of environmental justice, which has led to a muting of the U.S. Conference’s voice on the subject. “People who are doing this work are really struggling to get the voice out, to make Catholic teaching on the environment heard,” Breen said. “It’s not yet been fully embraced in the Catholic Church, particularly in the United States.”

When the conference agrees on a priority, it often puts together information packets to help priests preach on a subject and tie it to the Sunday Scripture readings. For example, October was Respect Life month in the church. “They just sent us a huge packet on pro-life issues,” said Rev. Donald Staib of St. Mary Magdalene in Apex, N.C. But priests said caring for creation was not mentioned in the packet as a pro-life issue.

“Protecting life from cradle to grave, from conception until natural death—that does appear to be the most consistent message,” said Mary Beth Magallanes, a Catholic who attends daily Mass.
Some Catholics who feel strongly about caring for creation say they would like to see the U.S. bishops emphasize that a pro-life stance naturally includes caring for the Earth. “The environment is the envelope that contains all life,” said Misleh of the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change.

“On the level of the archdiocese or parish, I see people being mobilized in the case of abortion and this is it,” Orzechowski said. “The challenge is to be better at integrating the issues of environmental justice under the umbrella of respect for life.”

McBriar said that the bishops tended to have a narrow focus on right-to-life. “It’s a rifle-shot vision. It’s not a floodlight—it’s a spotlight.” McBriar said that the St. Francis of Assisi parish emphasized the right to life as it relates to many issues, including the death penalty, war, a just wage for labor and caring for the Earth.

The church’s emphasis on the evils of abortion is not misplaced but could be broadened, others agree. “Abortion is an issue that has a very compelling need for some action, but that doesn’t mean Catholics should ignore the rest of Catholic social teaching,” Misleh said.

Many said that Catholics’ ignorance about church teaching on care for creation reflects a broader lack of awareness of Catholic social teaching. Several priests and lay leaders interviewed repeated a truism: Catholic social teaching is the best-kept secret in the church.

Care for creation is one of seven themes of Catholic social teaching identified by the U.S. bishops. At heart, Catholic social teaching is focused on creating a just society with a commitment to the poor, in which how the poor are faring is a basic moral test of society. It
is based on the belief that all humans have equal dignity and are brothers and sisters in the eyes of God.

The moral responsibility to care for others extends to the Earth. The U.S. bishops’ conference wrote: “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.”

**Mobilizing Catholics to Care**

Despite the obstacles, a grassroots movement, often led by laypeople, is slowly occurring within the church to inform and mobilize fellow Catholics to care for creation.

Members of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Raleigh, N.C., and Immaculate Conception Church in Durham, N.C., have planted organic community gardens. The goals are to feed the poor while demonstrating environmentally friendly gardening practices and encouraging consumption of local food produced with less of a carbon footprint, or use of energy resources.

“The Gulf oil spill was something that touched us all very deeply,” said Pat Kelly, a parishioner at St. Francis who coordinates efforts in the garden. “We believe local food is far more in tune with the message of taking care of the Earth, as we need in any way, shape or form to cut back on the use of petroleum.”

St. Francis and St. Thomas More in Chapel Hill, N.C., have incorporated advanced energy-efficient designs into new buildings. St. Thomas More led an effort this past year on waste reduction, promoting recycling and use of compostable plates at church functions. St. Camillus in Silver Spring, Md., has banned bottled water at church functions.
St. Thomas More also handed out the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor to its parishioners. The pledge asks Catholics to pray, learn, assess, act and advocate to mitigate the worst effects of climate change. So far, about 5,000 pledges from around the country have been submitted to the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change, coalition director Misleh said.

Considering there are 70 million Catholics in the United States, the effort has a ways to go, Misleh acknowledged.

**Politics, Pulpit and Rhetoric**

The political controversy over climate change in the United States also has affected environmental ministry in parishes. The vast majority of climate scientists agree that global warming is occurring and is largely man-made. But the public debate has become divisive, as climate change deniers, often funded by fossil-fuel interests, have generated controversy by questioning the science. But even skeptics are changing their minds based on the evidence. A new Berkeley study led by a prominent skeptic, Richard Muller, confirmed that the Earth has warmed by 1 degree Celsius since the 1950s.

Recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Energy show that worldwide emissions of greenhouse gases increased by 6 percent in 2010, the largest single-year increase ever recorded. The level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere now is higher than that in the worst-case scenario predicted four years ago. Under the worst-case projections, scientists at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicted a rise in average global temperature of between 4.3 and 11.5 degrees Fahrenheit by the end of the century, with a 7.2 degree Fahrenheit increase the most likely.
Mark Simon, a member of the environmental ministry team at St. Thomas More, said that after the church distributed the St. Francis pledge on climate change, a group of parishioners complained to the pastor and threatened to leave the church and withhold their money.

“To his credit, Father Durbin stood his ground and said this is Catholic social teaching,” Simon said. “The whole idea of the environment ends up in some people’s minds as being a very political thing. You’ve got a conservative church. A huge chunk of them think it’s a pile of baloney.”

Christy Elliott of the Franciscan Action Network, who works to promote civic engagement on climate change, said: “We certainly do get a lot of response and feedback that ‘Climate change is just baloney. Don’t you know it’s not true?’ I respond, ‘Haven’t you looked at what the bishops have written?’”

Misleh said he has been disappointed that more pastors haven’t been willing to take the issue on. “It’s uncomfortable for pastors to challenge parishioners on issues of controversy,” he said.

Elliott said the divisiveness of much public rhetoric adds another difficulty. “How do you stand up as a pastor, not a technical expert, and talk about moral principles without sounding like you’re condemning one group or lauding another group?” she said. “That also is a challenge.”

Misleh emphasized that the church’s position on climate change represents a middle ground. “A good 10 percent of Catholics and the population in general is skeptical at best and denying at worst,” Misleh said. “Another 10 percent of the Catholic population thinks the
world’s coming to end because of climate change. The church is rejecting both extremes. The science is credible, and we believe we should act prudently.”

**Overwhelming Inaction**

The message on the need to change lifestyles and adopt a simpler life to avoid the worst with global warming is a hard one to hear. “Preaching like that overwhelms people,” Pegg said.

“To me, it’s a huge moral issue, and we won’t look at it,” Siemen said. “Part of it is we feel paralyzed by it, we can’t do anything about it, it will demand life changes on our part, we don’t have government leadership on this.”

Concannon said, “If you talk about animals, it’s [an] easier [subject] for people to warm up to than to say there’s too much carbon dioxide in the air and I can’t drive my big car.”

To engage people, the message has to be challenging but also offer hope, Misleh noted. A simpler lifestyle offers spiritual benefits. “There’s a lot of room for becoming more authentic a human person if we’re not so busy consuming, whether that’s material possessions or consuming time with things that are not needful or life-giving, like TV,” he said.

McBriar of St. Francis continues to preach on caring for creation, even on “hot-potato issues” such as the Keystone XL pipeline that would carry oil from the Canadian tar sands to refineries along the Gulf of Mexico. “One of the things that’s important is that business or the rush for profit not cloud our vision to what we’re called to do as stewards of creation,” McBriar said.
Orzechowski said that he finds most people are receptive to the message of caring for creation. “They may not turn into activists, but they listen to the message.” He keeps his focus on signs of hope, such as the receptivity of the Latino community to his message and the growing number of parishes expressing an interest in learning more about caring for creation.

“I sometimes get frustrated with what I see as the somewhat slow pace of change, but at the same time I remind myself to take a deep breath and trust that God is in charge,” Orzechowski said. “I don’t have to see immediate evidence of results, with every Catholic parish being champions of environmental justice and in the avant-garde of championing God’s creation. Seeds are sprouting, and I know it.”
CHAPTER THREE

Three Local Catholic Churches Lead in Greening the Faith

Three Catholic churches in the diocese of Raleigh are leading innovative efforts to go green.

Members of St. Francis of Assisi Church in Raleigh and Immaculate Conception Church in Durham have planted organic community gardens. St. Francis and St. Thomas More in Chapel Hill have incorporated advanced energy-efficiency designs into seven new buildings completed in the last two years. St. Thomas More led an effort this past year on waste reduction, promoting recycling at its church and school and use of compostable plates at church functions. St. Thomas More also has encouraged parishioners to take the St. Francis Pledge to Care for Creation and the Poor, which asks Catholics to pray, learn and take action to address climate change.

These churches are putting into practice the moral exhortations of Pope Benedict XVI, who has been outspoken on the duty of Catholics to care for creation, especially in light of the crisis of global climate change. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has also called on Catholics to embrace environmental stewardship.

“Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith,” the U.S. Conference said in a summary of Catholic social teaching. “We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God’s creation.”
Fr. Scott McCue, the pastor of St. Thomas More, recently preached on the need to care for creation as part of loving God and neighbor. “I talked about outreach to the poor and those in need and how we live out our Christian love for each other. Our care for creation is an extension of that,” McCue said. “If we believe that we are stewards of what God has given to us, we have a responsibility to care for both other people and the resources we have been provided with.”

Fr. David McBriar, associate pastor at St. Francis of Assisi, said he often preaches on ecological themes, making connections between consumerist lifestyles and the effect on the environment and future generations. McBriar doesn’t shy from bringing up “hot-potato issues” like the Keystone XL pipeline. Environmental groups vigorously oppose the pipeline extension from the Canadian tar sands to the Gulf of Mexico for numerous reasons, including the likelihood of leaks that would contaminate water and soil and the contribution to global warming of extracting a particularly dirty form of oil. “One of the things that’s important is that business or the rush for profit not cloud our vision to what we’re called to do as stewards of creation,” McBriar said.

The churches’ environmental ministry efforts are led by laypeople who volunteer their time. But not everyone in the church communities has embraced the notion of care for creation. As with most church-sponsored activities, leaders of environmental ministry programs wish more people would actively participate.

For those who do sign on, the connection between their faith and the ethic of caring for the earth goes deep. Pat Kelly of St. Francis of Assisi said her motivation for environmental ministry ultimately comes from her call to follow Christ. “I definitely think
it’s the core of Christ’s message to be caring for others, and we’re taking care of others by taking care of the earth that supports others,” she said.

Sue Concannon, who has run an environmental ministry program at Immaculate Conception since 2005, said she has always felt an intuitive connection to the Earth. She experiences the glory of creation in the sacrament of the Eucharist. At the presentation of the gifts of the Eucharist upon the altar, the priest says, “Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life.”

“When you’re eating the body and blood, you’re eating creation. The mixing of water with wine, that’s creation,” Concannon said.

Concannon began the ministry at Immaculate Conception after completing Just Faith, a Catholic program focused on social justice that ended with urging participants to become active in service to the church. She also was inspired by a class taught by Norman Wirzba at Duke University on “faithful eating,” or how eating in a way that respects the land and animals is a spiritual discipline.

The environmental stewardship team at Immaculate Conception has led wide-ranging efforts to educate the faithful about their responsibility to care for creation, both during church services and outside of Mass. The church has offered seminars on topics including water conservation and energy conservation and sponsors an annual Earth Day fair that attracts more than 1,000 people. Energy conservation tips include driving less by combining errands and reducing home energy consumption by adjusting thermostats and insulating. People can reduce water usage by taking shorter showers, doing full loads of laundry and using rain barrels to collect water for irrigation.
An “Earth Care” column in the Immaculate Conception weekly bulletin quotes Scripture and offers practical tips on living in a way more friendly to the Earth, Concannon noted. For example, columns have informed parishioners about where to drop off hard-to-recycle items and alerted readers to distress in ocean fisheries, offering best and worst choices for seafood to eat (Best: U.S. farmed abalone, farmed catfish and farmed clams. Worst: Caviar, Chilean sea bass and cod.)

For Palm Sunday, the church spends extra funds to purchase eco-palm fronds that are not sprayed with pesticides. The palms are delivered in a truck fueled by corn oil.

Immaculate Conception this year joined with the Interfaith Food Shuttle and several other churches to begin an organic community garden on a vacant lot in the West End neighborhood of downtown Durham. Members of the congregation and community volunteer their time in the garden. Each week part of the harvest is delivered to homebound or needy parishioners. The community garden has the dual mission of increasing access to fresh, healthy food and educating people about nutrition and cooking with vegetables.

Gene Aiken, 16, is one of two neighborhood teenagers hired to care for the garden and help involve the community. “Most of the stuff I’ve never known how to grow until now. I’ve grown and harvested plants I’ve never personally seen before,” Aiken said. “I ate some basil—that’s pretty good. I’ve eaten Swiss chard.”

St. Francis of Assisi Church in Raleigh also began a small community garden on its campus last spring. “The Gulf Oil spill was something that touched us all very deeply,” said Pat Kelly, one of the parishioners who coordinates efforts in the garden. “We believe local food is far more in tune with message of taking care of the earth, as we need in any way, shape or form to cut back on the use of petroleum.”
St. Francis donates each week’s harvest to the Interfaith Food Shuttle. Although the garden is small (about 150 square feet), Kelly said she was “totally blown away” by the harvest, despite the hot and dry gardening conditions for most of last summer. The garden has produced beans, spinach, arugula, broccoli, okra, eggplant, peppers, tomatoes and squash.

Pat Kelly’s husband, Paul, said he learned much from this year’s experience in the garden. “If you have one thing that does really well and another two or three have done horribly and the rest is ok, that’s a banner year. Gardening is a humbling thing,” Paul Kelly said. “I’ve appreciated those kinds of lessons and putting ourselves back in touch with where food comes from.”

The leaders of environmental ministries also have made efforts to care for creation by reducing energy use at home. The Kellys have saved energy by hanging laundry to dry, installing foam installation under the house, and adjusting thermostats so the house is a little colder in winter and warmer in summer. They also have been replacing older inefficient appliances with more efficient Energy Star appliances. “It’s almost like, oh it’s broken, yay! We can get a new refrigerator,” Pat Kelly said.

Sue Concannon said her family has cut energy bills in half in their 1920s house by following through on recommendations from an energy audit. The Concannons installed a solar hot water heater and programmable thermostats, insulated the house, sealed the windows, and use a clothesline to dry laundry.

At the parish level, St. Francis of Assisi also has garnered attention for the energy efficient and sustainable design of four new parish and school buildings on its campus: Elizabeth Hall, St. Mary of the Angels Chapel, the Assisi Community Center, and the Siena Center for Lifelong Learning. Three of the buildings received gold awards in Leadership in
Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) from the U.S. Green Building Council, and the fourth is also expected to receive LEED certification. The buildings, which cost $13 million, used recycled materials and diverted waste from landfills during construction. They are designed to reduce significantly water and energy consumption and maintain a high indoor air quality.

St. Thomas More in Chapel Hill has also incorporated environmentally friendly features in the design of three new buildings: the Arts & Music and Gymnasium buildings for the school, and the Parish Center & Social Hall. The buildings cost $12 million. These buildings save energy and water through use of natural lighting, energy efficient windows and roofs, a high efficiency HVAC system, low-flow toilets, and use of reclaimed water for irrigation.

The environmental ministry team at St. Thomas More has also been working to educate parishioners on Christian environmental stewardship. At Lent, the traditional time of sacrifice and penance, the team introduced the theme of waste reduction. “How about giving up some things?” said Mark Simon, co-chair of the environmental stewardship ministry at St. Thomas More Church. “We’re an over-consumptive society. We can use less, recycle more.”

For the annual parish picnic last June, the team convinced the church to use compostable plates, cups and flatware instead of disposables. One small hitch occurred. The Mexican restaurant that catered the event delivered its food wrapped in non-disposable aluminum foil. Simon recalled standing in the rain and separating the foil from the compostable waste. Because compostable plates decompose better when kept separate from food and yard waste, St. Thomas More arranged for a special deal with Orange County Solid Waste Management to accept compostables from their large events. To further reduce waste,
St. Thomas More recently purchased plates, glasses and flatware to use at events attended by fewer than 100 people.

St. Thomas More’s recycling effort within the church and the adjoining school has been successful, going from 16.5 tons of recycling in 2009-2010 to 23 tons of recycling in 2011, Simon said. The church next plans to focus on reducing energy consumption. Advent calendars will offer parishioners daily tips on reducing energy use.

Still, despite the many successful environmental initiatives at the three churches, the lay leaders admit that efforts to attract parishioners to educational events have been somewhat disappointing. During Advent 2010, Simon helped put together a series of talks that addressed church social teaching as well as practical tips related to the environment. “Man, it was like pulling teeth to get people to come,” Simon said. “People are so set in their ways. They just go to Mass and then want to get out of there.”

Concannon said that although Immaculate Conception has more than 4,000 members, the most who have volunteered for the environmental stewardship committee has been seven, while seminars on environmental topics tend to attract 15 to 20 people. “It’s been a long, long, slow road,” she said.

Still, Concannon takes pleasure in small successes. Now, when Immaculate Conception has women’s retreats, people bring their own dishes. When the environmental committee first proposed using eco-palms, the committee had to find a way to fund them. Now the church pays for the palms routinely. The popularity of the annual Earth Day fair also is encouraging.

Perhaps the most satisfying moment for Concannon came on the celebration of the Easter Vigil in 2011. She had been invited to create a slideshow of scenes from nature to
accompany the reading of Genesis and the creation story. Slides moved through photos illustrating the beginning of creation in a dark abyss to the creation of light, then water, plants, animals and people. The church was dark, candles were glowing, and the choir sang. As photos of light reflecting through clouds appeared on a screen behind the pulpit, a lector read in a booming voice, “God saw how good it was. Evening came, and morning followed.”
CHAPTER FOUR

The Making of a Franciscan Environmental Activist

Priests played active roles in the Civil Rights Movement and in Vietnam War protests, but in recent decades—even as the world confronts a host of social and political conflicts—they have been less visible as activists in the United States.

Franciscan friar Jacek Orzechowski is an exception. A vicar at St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring, Md., Orzechowski was arrested in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 29, 2011, along with 50 other religious leaders after protesting in front of the White House against the proposed Keystone XL oil pipeline. The pipeline would carry synthetic crude oil extracted from the tar sands of Alberta, Canada, to refineries along the Gulf of Mexico.

At a State Department public hearing on Oct. 7, 2011, Orzechowski said the Keystone XL pipeline is “morally indefensible” because it will prolong the country’s addiction to fossil fuels, contributing further to global warming. The poor and vulnerable in the tropics and subtropics are most at risk from climate change.

“We are already witnessing glaciers melting, sea level rising, increased storms, floods, droughts, millions of people being displaced, rapid loss of biodiversity,” Orzechoskwi testified. “As many as 600 million people could face malnutrition and hunger all over the world. Approving the Keystone XL pipeline runs the risk of condemning the poorest of the world to a desperate struggle for food and survival.”
In November 2011, President Barack Obama announced that he had asked the State Department to re-open the review process for the Keystone XL pipeline to consider climate change and environmental impacts, among other factors, before making a final decision. Obama’s decision came just days after more than 10,000 protesters encircled the White House. Environmentalists interpreted Obama’s decision as a temporary victory. (Orzechowski did not participate in the protest because he was attending a Franciscan conference in Ecuador.)

Unlike secular environmental activists, who tend to be motivated by fear of destruction, Orzechowski said his calls for action are influenced by the value of love. “It’s not just a vague feeling of compassion, but love that compels us to act, love that connects us to reason, love that expresses itself in the determination to ask critical questions,” he said in an interview.

**In God’s Cathedral**

Orzechowski’s connection to the Earth goes deep, beyond the physical enjoyment and beauty of nature. “I’ve always loved the outdoors,” he said. In the mountains he often experiences God’s presence and a sense of peace and joy. “I feel I’m in God’s cathedral when I’m in the mountains hiking,” Orzechowski said.

He gradually became interested in connecting his experience of God’s creation with his Catholic faith. Orzechowski, 42, who grew up in Bialystok, Poland, was inspired by Pope John Paul II’s World Youth Day address in Czestochowa, Poland, in 1991.

“He challenged young people to be involved in building a civilization of love and talked about how Catholic social teaching lays the foundation for a program for making that happen,” Orzechowski said. “He also mentioned specifically the need to protect the
environment that is being threatened and lamented how many young people in Western Europe are not involved in politics.”

Orzechowski grew up attending a church where priests were not afraid to speak out and challenge the political system. “In my church in Poland, I heard preaching against communism,” he said.

Later, while studying at the Washington Theological Union in Washington, D.C., Orzechowski met Keith Warner, a Franciscan friar who had been active for years in reforestation projects. Orzechowski joined the Religious Campaign for Forest Conservation, an organization that advocated stopping logging in U.S. national forests. Orzechowski saw forests that had been clear-cut and mountaintops that had been blown up and heard the stories of local people who were affected by environmental ruin.

He also had the opportunity to explore the spiritual dimension of wilderness. And he met people from other faith traditions who encouraged him to become an activist. “They challenged me to go back to my Franciscan tradition and take it seriously. To go beyond the birdbath and blessing animals on the feast of St. Francis,” he said.

St. Francis, perhaps the most beloved Catholic saint, was named patron saint of ecology by Pope John Paul II in 1979. The Franciscan Keith Warner, in a 2003 essay, challenged Franciscans to go beyond a “feel-good” love of nature that is expressed in the popularity of garden birdbaths featuring St. Francis. While St. Francis did write lyrically about the beauty of nature, his life was exemplary for humility, service to the poor, simplicity in the use of material goods, and peacemaking.
Orzechowski said that moving beyond the birdbath meant making a commitment to an ecological conversion that involved learning about environmental science and political realities, while at the same time remaining grounded in Franciscan spirituality.

Ecological Conversion

After Orzechowski was ordained in 2002, he was assigned to Immaculate Conception Church in Durham, N.C., where he worked with pastor Fr. David McBriar, also a Franciscan. Together, they began reaching out to people in the parish to inspire them to ecological conversion. Pope John Paul II first spoke of a need for ecological conversion in a 1990 World Day of Peace message, when he linked degradation of the environment to a preoccupation with material consumption.

Orzechowski and McBriar put together a series of seminars on care for creation that explored the teachings of Scripture and made connections between the duty of Christians and what was happening with climate change and other environmental issues. Twenty people attended the first series of seminars. About 15 people attended the second series. Immaculate Conception has a congregation of about 4,000 people.

Perhaps the most popular effort begun during Orzechowski’s tenure at Immaculate Conception was an Earth Day Fair held after Mass. The fair attracted 1,000 people and featured activities for children, such as painting part of a huge banner with the theme of creation, as well as offering information on things like energy conservation and water conservation. Orzechowski also worked with Latino youth to develop skits on global climate change that they presented at an annual diocesan youth gathering.

At church, the Franciscan friar also found ways to weave themes of caring for creation and environmental justice into his homilies. “I preach about it, sometimes to the
point where people say this is all you preach about,” he said. “A lot of people are receptive and appreciative of it. There are a few who do not welcome it.”

Barbara Pegg, a member of the parish staff at Immaculate Conception during Orzechowski’s time there, said she admired his courage in speaking hard truths. But she said it was at times overwhelming to hear a message that demands a major change in lifestyle. “The problem was that there was never a homily in which Jacek was not preaching both environmental justice and social justice and the people would shut him off and shut him down.

“I watched Jacek, and I think that that’s how the prophets were killed because people just get sick of hearing it. It doesn’t mean it’s not the truth, but you just get sick of hearing it,” Pegg said.

Fr. McBriar smiled as he spoke of working with Orzechowski. “Everybody loved him, even those who totally disagreed with him,” McBriar said. “He wasn’t a man with any arrogance. He was strong, but not formidable, and people just thought the world of him because he was always at the barricades.”

**Environmental Justice Work**

Three years ago, Orzechowski was transferred to St. Camillus Church in Silver Spring, Md. There he has begun a number of efforts to engage the community on issues of environmental justice.

Orzechowski has been particularly active in working with the Latino community at St. Camillus and says they have been “very receptive” to the message of environmental justice. He has led eco-spirituality retreats, involved the community in cleaning up a wetlands area, and led ecological Stations of the Cross, an adaptation of the traditional meditations on the
suffering and death of Jesus. Orzechowski also has spoken on Radio Maria, a Latino radio station, and was pleased when staff asked him to provide more materials and programming on ecological conversion for future programs.

At his urging, the parish banned bottled water at church functions. “I’m not claiming that the entire community now is green and has adopted a more sustainable personal lifestyle, but we are definitely making a dent,” he said.

Orzechowski said he believed seeds were sprouting in the Catholic Church nationwide, as different organizations within the church create teaching modules on climate change, care for creation and living simpler lives.

Despite these signs of progress, Orzechowski acknowledged that he’s on a leading edge in the church in promoting environmental justice. He would like to see the U.S. bishops do more to emphasize Catholic social teaching on care for creation as part of the church’s well-known teaching on respect for life. “On the level of the archdiocese or parish, I see people being mobilized in the case of abortion and this is it,” Orzechowski said. “The challenge is to be better at integrating the issues of environmental justice under the umbrella of respect for life.”

He tries not to be discouraged by the inevitable negativity that comes with environmental activism and to focus instead on specific actions he can take. “There are a lot of discouraging signs about what’s happening to the environment and how slow we are to respond to the challenge,” the friar said. But, he added, “It’s better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.”

Today the passion is evident when Orzechowski speaks about the sanctity of creation and environmental justice. He said he was buoyed by the sense of the Holy Spirit at work
during his recent activities protesting the Keystone XL pipeline. At the State Department hearing on the pipeline, Orzechowki’s voice took on a new intensity as he said: “The Franciscan tradition holds up the sacredness of all life. God’s creation has a profound value and meaning.

“The Judeo-Christian tradition teaches that the human family can find true peace and security only when we live together as brothers and sisters in integrity, in justice, in harmony with the rest of earth. The debate over the Keystone pipeline ought to be informed by the values of love, of solidarity, of special concern for the poor and most vulnerable, the common good of all of God’s creation,” Orzechowski testified.

Later, Orzechowski said he was overcome at the hearing by a sense of being in church. “There was a sense of people fighting for the common good, expressing solidarity,” he said. He was impressed by the diverse background of those who testified: farmers, Native Americans, cowboys, academics from Cornell University, activists from environmental groups and young people.

Orzechowski recalled: “There was kind of the air of transcendence. It was something more about, not about individual people, but about our life together, about people, about God’s creation. There was a faith dimension, of God’s people wrestling with difficult questions. For me they were not only political questions, but questions of who we are as a people. What do we need to be happy? Where are we going? Basic human questions. I felt very much the presence of the Holy Spirit there. I felt hope that God is with us in his presence.”

At the August protest against the Keystone XL pipeline in front of the White House, Orzechowski said he and other members of the interfaith community remarked on the
parallel with the Civil Rights Movement and its tradition of peaceful, respectful civil disobedience. Expecting criticism from some who might label his activism as inappropriate Orzechowski and fellow Franciscan protester Erick Lopez wrote a paper explaining their motivations.

“Unless our faith communities get interested and serious about helping to save our civilization and the life-support system of our planet, they risk losing their intellectual and moral credibility,” Orzechowski and Lopez wrote. “Leaving the task of saving the human family from full-fledged climate change calamity to scientists and environmentalists would liken us to the priest and Levite from the Gospel. Too busy attending to ‘spiritual things,’ they left the badly injured man at the side of the road to die.”

The friar said he reflected at length on whether to wear his brown Franciscan habit to the protest, knowing that he likely would attract criticism from some. He considered what St. Francis might have done. Finally, he decided it was important to wear the habit. “It expressed my belief that spirituality and politics are distinct but inseparable,” Orzechowski said.

In taking a political risk, Orzechowski said he believed he was expressing the essence of what it meant to be Christian. “This is what it means to believe in the Incarnation, in God becoming flesh, God getting his hands dirty in the act of creation. We have a call to let God act through us, not only in the liturgy but in political action.”

Orzechowski remembered one powerful image from that day he was arrested in front of the White House with three of his parishioners from St. Camillus. “There was a parishioner who always comes to 10:30 Mass and always looks me straight in the eye when she puts out her hands and receives Communion. When I saw her being handcuffed and walked to the paddy wagon, all I could think of was the continuation between receiving
Communion and the handcuffs. She was saying yes to Communion, saying yes to the mission we’re called to as Catholics, saying yes to the cross. I also was inspired by that.”
Timeline:
Developments on Global Warming and Catholic Response, 1988 to 2001

**January 1990**
Pope John Paul II: “The gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related ‘greenhouse effect’ has now reached crisis proportions …” “Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style.” He calls for a “conversion” in thought and behavior away from “instant gratification and consumerism” to focus on the common good.

**November 1990**
The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issues its first report documenting “clear scientific consensus” on estimates of global warming and calls for action. The IPCC says the increased average global air temperature fits with the prediction of climate models but also is consistent with the magnitude of natural climate variability.

**November 1991**
The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops calls for Catholics to act as stewards of God’s creation, citing urgent environmental problems such as global warming. “Our mistreatment of the natural world diminishes our own dignity and sacredness, not only because we are destroying resources that future generations of humans need, but because we are engaging in actions that contradict what it means to be human … As individuals, as institutions, as a people, we need a change of heart to save the planet for our children and generations yet unborn.”

**September 1995**
A second IPCC report warns that humans have entered a period of climate change. “The balance of evidence suggests a discernible human influence on global climate.”

**April 1998**
Industry opponents of action on global warming develop a campaign to recruit scientists to help create public uncertainty about the risk of global warming. A draft report of the proposal is leaked to the New York Times.

**February 2001**
The IPCC issues a third report, for the first time expressing confidence that most of the global warming trend since the mid-1950s is attributable to an increase in man-made greenhouse gases.

**July 2001**
The U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops releases a statement called “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good.” “Each of us should carefully consider our choices and lifestyles … we need to ask about ways we can conserve energy, prevent pollution, and live more simply.”

**Summer 1988**
First sustained U.S. media coverage of global warming as the U.S. experiences a record-breaking hot summer. NASA scientist James Hansen testifies to Congress about the presence of man-made global warming and calls for action.

**November 1990**
The Kyoto Protocol is approved without U.S. participation. The international treaty commits 37 nations to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by 5 percent from the 1990 level.

**July 2001**
The U.S Conference of Catholic Bishops releases a statement called “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence and the Common Good.” “Each of us should carefully consider our choices and lifestyles … we need to ask about ways we can conserve energy, prevent pollution, and live more simply.”
Timeline:
Developments on Global Warming and Catholic Response, 2005 to 2011

2005
The public debates whether Hurricane Katrina and other major hurricanes could be attributed to global warming.

September 2005

May 2006
Al Gore’s movie on global warming, “An Inconvenient Truth,” becomes a smash hit.

2006
The Catholic Coalition on Climate Change is launched to help educate parishes and individuals about the moral implications of climate change.

September 2006

January 2007
The IPCC releases a fourth report. “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal, as is now evident from observations of increases in global average air and ocean temperatures, widespread melting of snow and ice, and rising global average sea level.”

February 2007

September 2007
The Vatican purchases a 37-acre forest in Hungary and plants trees to offset its yearly carbon emissions.

September 2007

September 2008
The Vatican begins installing the first of 2,400 solar panels on the roof of its audience hall.

September 2008

January 2009
International representatives at the United Nations-sponsored Copenhagen Summit fail to reach agreement on legally binding targets for reducing CO2 emissions.

February 2009

January 2010
Pope Benedict XVI: “Can we remain indifferent before the problems associated with such realities as climate change, desertification, the deterioration and loss of productivity in vast agricultural areas, the pollution of rivers and aquifers, the loss of biodiversity, the increase of natural catastrophes and the deforestation of equatorial and tropical regions?” Man has “a duty to exercise responsible stewardship over creation, to care for it and to cultivate it.”

January 2010

May 2011
The Pontifical Academy of Sciences releases a climate change report. “We call on all people and nations to recognize the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by the anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and by changes in forests, wetlands, grasslands, and other land uses… By acting now, in the spirit of common but differentiated responsibility, we accept our duty to one another and to the stewardship of a planet blessed with the gift of life.”

May 2011

October 2011
A Berkeley study led by climate change skeptic Richard Muller confirmed that the Earth has warmed by 1 degree Celsius since the mid-1950s.

October 2011

November 2011
U.S. Department of Energy figures show that in 2010, global emissions of heat-trapping carbon dioxide increased by a record 6 percent. Global emissions are rising faster than under the worst-case scenario projected by the IPCC.

November 2011
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