



**Catholicism,  
Ecology, and the  
Environment:  
A Bishop's Reflection**

Christian Social Thought Series

Dominique Rey

## Foreword

Originally published in 2012 under the title, *Peut-on être Catho et Ecolo? Lettre sur l'écologie* (Can One Be Catholic and Green? A Letter on Ecology), this text, as its style and format suggests, is a pastoral letter from a bishop to the Catholics in his diocese. It concerns a subject that has garnered increasing attention from Catholics and other Christians around the world. Since the 1970s, debates surrounding the environment have moved into ever-closer focus for the Church. These discussions featured significantly in Catholic social teaching after the Second Vatican Council, especially with connection to economic issues as well as argument surrounding matters ranging from mining to the welfare of animals.

In itself, the Catholic view of the environment is relatively easy to summarize. Man is understood as intrinsically superior to the natural world. He is charged with dominion over it in order that it may be used to promote integral human development. However, man's dominion is not absolute. We cannot literally do whatever we wish with animals and nature. Absolute dominion belongs to God alone. Moreover, he desires that we use the natural world responsibly and therefore in ways that facilitate human flourishing. This in turn means that our free choices and actions regarding our use of the world that God created are as subject to his moral law as all our other choices.

In his reflections on the manner in which Christians should reflect upon the environment, the Catholic moral theologian and natural-law scholar Germain Grisez observes that implicitly atheist-materialist views of man and the universe are at the root of positions that one might initially consider to have nothing in common with each other. “Many people who do not believe in God,” he writes, “imagine that human beings are the sole source of meaning and value in the universe. Supposing subpersonal realities to lack intelligibility and value of their own, which humans can grasp and ought to respect, they think of nature as being at humankind’s disposal: individuals, businesses, and governments may do with it whatever they please.” On the other hand, Grisez states that some people

[f]eeling a quasi-religious reverence for nature and a kinship with subhuman things ... may even go so far as to ascribe rights to them. On this view any human intervention in nature is, as it were, a sacrilege if it markedly alters the world or destroys any unusual feature of the landscape or any species of living thing; while contemplation is the only unquestionably legitimate human use of the subhuman world which, insofar as possible, should be preserved intact and allowed to develop according to its own dynamics and without technological intervention.

In the contemporary Christian world, it is arguable that the latter temptation is far stronger than the former. More than a few Christians, for example, have attempted to portray Saint Francis of Assisi as some type of medieval eco-Gnostic. As his namesake, Pope Francis rather forcibly stated in his 2013 homily at Assisi, the message of Saint Francis is not “a kind of pantheistic harmony with forces of the cosmos.... That is not Franciscan either! It is not Franciscan, but a notion that some people have invented!”

That may be why Monseigneur Dominique Rey, the bishop of Fréjus-Toulon in France, devotes considerable time in this pastoral letter to pointing out the theological and philosophical errors that often drive such thinking. As he puts it very bluntly several times, *the world is not God*. That clearly puts the Catholic Church at odds with a good number of radical environmentalists, religious and secular, in their implicit views of the environment.

Monseigneur Rey is not, however, primarily focused upon underscoring the negative aspects of the modern environmentalism. Although he addresses these matters in detail, his primary purpose in this letter is to show Catholics and other Christians how they might think about—so that they can act correctly—the environment in a way consistent with sacred Scripture, tradition, and magisterial teaching. This text is consequently full of meditations on biblical verses, the insights of Church Fathers, and recent magisterial teaching on ecological issues.

At the core of Msgr. Rey's argument is the claim that our crisis in thinking about the environment flows directly from the wider and deeper crisis of man. Reminiscent of Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and their successor Francis, Msgr. Rey stresses that once we lose a correct understanding of man's relationship to God and how that relationship shapes man's self-understanding, then we should not be surprised that our capacity to think coherently about ecological subjects starts to corrode. For once God disappears from our horizon, Msgr. Rey specifies, our capacity to reason correctly rapidly declines. After all, if we reject the *Logos* himself—the source of human reason—then we should not be surprised if our reason becomes profoundly disordered.

As part of that discussion, Msgr. Rey takes up a theme that was especially underscored by Benedict XVI but also elaborated upon by Pope Francis. This is the manner in which so many people, most notably in Western Europe and North America, ascribe enormous value to subrational creation and yet simultaneously adopt views that verge on humanophobia. “We are,” he argues, “more and better preoccupied with the environment or the natural habitat of the various animal species that are on the verge of extinction than about man's own. Countries adopt laws designed to protect more efficiently animal embryos, but they do not hesitate to allow experimentation on human embryos.” Putting human beings back in the ecological question, Msgr. Rey maintains, means putting God back in his proper place *vis-à-vis* man and the world that God created through his original act of creation: an act that humans are called upon to bring to fruition by acting as what might be loosely called “co-creators.”

Those looking for detailed policy-prescriptions applicable to particular environmental problems will not find them in this text. Outlining such proposals, Msgr. Rey affirms, is not the primary responsibility of bishops. The most important service of the Church's pastors regarding environmental questions is to frame the debates and issues correctly so that *lay* Catholics can act in ways consistent with the gospel and Church teaching. At the same time, Msgr. Rey maintains that Catholics can and often should make some very significant changes in the way they live their personal lives. His section entitled “Back to the Land” is not, as might be initially supposed, a call for humans to somehow cease economically developing and creating wealth. On the contrary, he makes it clear that humans have a unique ability to innovate that needs to be expressed. It is a call for humility, sobriety, and asceticism in the way we live our lives. This

theme featured significantly in the teachings of Paul VI, Blessed John Paul II, and Benedict XVI and has been further underlined by Pope Francis from the very beginning of his pontificate.

One of the most striking things about Msgr. Rey's letter is its closing emphasis upon the sacraments and other features of the Christian life, such as prayer, as a way for people to reorient themselves toward a truly Christian concept of God's relationship to man and of man's relationship to the natural world. In these participations in the life of Christ himself, Msgr. Rey believes, we can reestablish balance in man's view and understanding of the environment and its place in the cosmos.

On one level, such things are distinctly Christian. Yet to Msgr. Rey's mind, this is the contribution that Christians need to make precisely because, though Christian, they are also *true*. In the truth, we find true freedom, real justice, and authentic solidarity. Thus, by loving, knowing, and choosing the truth, Christians can reshape the way everyone—Christians and non-Christians and even unbelievers—thinks about the natural world in which we live, move, and have our being and thereby help foreshadow the kingdom that is to come.

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