

# The Greening of the Church

Edward P. Echlin

Two years ago the West German Green Party described itself like this: 'We are for an economic system orientated towards the vital requirements of people and of future generations, towards the preservation of nature and the judicious handling of natural resources.'<sup>1</sup> This awareness of the environmental dimension to economic problems led to its getting 8.5% of the West German popular vote in 1987.

We may ask ourselves where Christians have been while this awareness has been unfolding. Is Christian anthropology inadequate to care for the earth? Or have the followers of Jesus somehow lost the delicate balance between taking from the earth what is necessary and caring for this planet?

The problem seems to be with the balance. A key biblical text is Genesis 1:28, which the R.S.V. translates 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it'. Other translations have 'conquer it', 'have dominion over it' and 'dominate it'. Yet the idea Genesis is conveying is that man is God's viceroy commissioned to care for God's garden, which is 'very good'. C.H. Moule observes,

He is meant to have dominion over it and to use it ... but only for God's sake, only Adam in paradise, cultivating it for the Lord. As soon as he begins to use it selfishly, and reaches out to take fruit which is forbidden by the Lord, instantly the ecological balance is upset and nature begins to groan.<sup>2</sup>

The text, moreover, should be taken in conjunction with Genesis 9, where God's covenant clearly includes the entire earth community. 'This is the sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature.' (Gen 9:12) By emphasizing man's dominion to the virtual exclusion of stewardship Christians can lose the balance. For all living creatures are included in salvation. 'Thou, Lord, shalt save both man and beast; How excellent is thy mercy, O God: and the children of men shall put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.' (Ps 36:6—7) The Old Testament teaches reverent conservation. 'If you chance to come upon a bird's nest ... you shall not take the mother with the young; you shall let the mother go, but the young you may take to yourself.' (Deut 22:6—7) Although the God of the Jews is a Lord of history and the Jewish milieu a harsh terrain in which to earn one's bread the Old

332

Testament repeatedly reminds us of the inherent value of creation.

Jesus' love for all creatures appears vividly in one lapidary utterance about grain, 'First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear'. (Mk 4:28) His attitude to creation was that of his Father. 'Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.' (Mt 6:26)

St. Paul grasped the relationship between God, man and nature. In Ephesians he testified to God's purpose 'that the universe, all in heaven and on Earth, might be brought into unity in Christ'. (Eph 1:9—10) Stanislas Lyonnet comments, 'Each reality, animate, inanimate or personal comes under this influence in a way proper to its own condition.'<sup>3</sup> In Romans 'the created universe waits with eager expectation for God's sons to be revealed ... because the universe itself is to be freed from the shackles of mortality and enter the liberty and splendour of the children of God'. (Rom 8:19—21) Lyonnet remarks that Paul does not 'limit his horizon to the human world alone'.<sup>4</sup>

The Fathers confronted the perennial problematic of possessions which had so concerned St. Luke.<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria and Jerome worked in very different milieus but they concurred that the earth's goods should be shared. When prospective converts approached the Church Clement was concerned that their possessions should not exclude them from the community.

If it is not possible to supply those needs without substance, and he bids people abandon their substance, what else would the Lord be doing than exhorting to give and not to give the same things, to feed and not to feed, to take in and to shut out, to share and not to share? Which were the most irrational of all things.<sup>6</sup>

Jerome valued poverty. But his willingness to permit Christians to have and share possessions as a second level of perfection is significant because destructive exploitation of the earth will cease only when and if avaricious consumption gives way to sharing. 'We accept it', Jerome writes, 'providing preference is given to the first.'<sup>7</sup>

Benedict of Nursia in his Rule, which was to have incalculable influence, required of his monks absolute sharing and a community of goods.<sup>8</sup> One looks in vain to the monastic movement, however, for a theology of nature. Benedict is tantalisingly vague on the place of work in the fields for his little school of perfection. Nor have his varied followers been able to agree on just how much and how closely a monk should work with nature.<sup>9</sup> But Benedict does convey appreciation of proximity to the land and his ideal of self-sufficiency remains a treasure within the Christian heritage. Monastic artists and craftsmen brilliantly witnessed to the interrelatedness of God, man and nature. Their masterpieces now scattered about the museums of the world and tucked

in corners of country churches, radiate the reverence and respect of Christ for creation.

So did Francis of Assisi, whose genius it was to share the universe while cherishing the smallest creature. For Francis every fountain, every bird and every herb praised God.

All praise be yours, my Lord, through Sister Earth, my mother

Who feeds us in her sovereignty and produces

Various fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.<sup>10</sup>

St Thomas Aquinas sought to prove the existence of God from the beauty, order and variety of creatures. His writings were studied in schools and, later, in seminaries in what were to be the dark ages for men's appreciation of the theophanic variety of creation.

He brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone. He produced many and diverse creatures so that, what was wanting to one in the manifestation of the Divine goodness, might be supplied by another.<sup>11</sup>

The craftsmen of the middle ages represented this variety in the medium of wood and stone. Their message may be exemplified in what became known as the green man. They built churches near the riparian shrines of the ancient god of fertility, and represented this deity as a ludicrous head with diabolic ears and gaping mouth from which there sprouted vegetation. They gradually subjected him to Christ until the green man vanished; but their carvings of all things great and small remain to praise God in wood and stone, as in the thirteenth-century Chapter House at Southwell Minster, with its realistic variety of vegetation and animals. The green men remain forever subdued under oaken misericords as at Ripon Cathedral, fastened against choir walls as at Beverley, gleaming from golden bosses as at Bolton Abbey or the little church at Linton near a sacred river bend in upper Wharfedale.<sup>12</sup>

The medieval mystics too found God in creatures. For Eckhart 'every creature is a work of God and book about God'.<sup>13</sup> Hildegarde of Bingen expressed the interrelation of God, man and nature in imagery of romantic love,

Creation, of course, was fashioned to be adorned,  
to be showered,

to be gifted with the love of the creator.

The entire world has been embraced by this kiss.<sup>14</sup>

In different imagery this was the attitude towards creation transmitted to posterity by Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Along with the massive tomes of Aquinas the tiny book of Loyola was to

be pondered in succeeding centuries. In the preparatory 'First Principle' Loyola himself seems almost within the man-as-dominator mentality which was already in the ascendancy. 'The other creatures on the earth were created for man's sake to help him to attain the end for which he was created'. But he maintained the biblical balance. Retreatants of a day, a weekend, a month completed their exercises with a contemplation to acquire love of God through consideration of his creatures.

Consider how God dwells in creatures, in the elements giving them being, in the plants giving them growth, in animals giving them feeling, and in men giving them understanding ... Consider how God works and labours for me in all created things, ... in the heavens, elements, plants, fruit, cattle, etc. giving them being, preserving them, giving them growth and feeling.<sup>15</sup>

The Counter Reformation was succeeded in the west by the age of science, the centuries of Bacon, Newton, Descartes and Darwin, the mechanistic universe, the industrial revolution, technology, Hiroshima, 'the great cloverleaf and the giant switchboard', space travel, computers and eventually acid rain and Chernobyl. Throughout this fateful epoch Christian anthropology has been engaged with redemption but it has been homocentric to the virtual exclusion of other creatures. 'While there is a plethora of books on man', writes John Macquarrie, 'there is a scarcity of books on the theology of nature, and this neglect may be symptomatic of our present environmental crisis.'<sup>17</sup> While Protestant theology has been very concerned with justification, Catholic theology has concentrated on ecclesiology and, at times, hierarchology. One looks almost in vain to Trent, Vatican I, the social encyclicals, the manuals, moral theology and popular preaching for a theology of creation which presents man and nature as other than dominator and used. The balance is missing, the emphasis misplaced. Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum* reflected the community for whom he spoke.

If he (a working person) lives sparingly, saves money, and for greater security, invests his savings in land, the land, in such case, is only his wages under another form; and, consequently, a workingman's little estate thus purchased should be as completely at his full disposal as are the wages he received for his labour.<sup>18</sup>

The pastorals of the American hierarchy are virtually lacking in references to creation (other than man) except for statements such as the following which are almost embarrassing when read within the perspective of the ecological crisis. 'Every man knows instinctively that he is, somehow, a superior being. He knows he is superior to the land he tills, the machine he operates or the animals which are at his service.'<sup>19</sup> The recent agreed statements of ARCIC tell the same story—Eucharist,

ministry, authority, justification. Where do these sister churches express substantial agreement on creation and man's attitude towards his environment?<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless the tradition of the pre-industrial centuries has remained a living legacy. 'The Church', says Vatican II, 'in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.' (D.V., II, 8) Aquinas has been studied, the legacy of the medieval master craftsman is cherished, retreats have been made, friars have preached, monks have taught and third world Christians, including the Indians of the New World, have contributed wisdom. There have been parents, writers, scholars and artists who have transmitted Christ's reverence and respect for creation. To cite but one example, contemporary with Leo XIII, there is the little church at Kirk Hammerton near York with its pre-Raphaelite chancel decorated by a young artist named George Ostrehan in 1895. Around his painted walls there unfolds a banner witnessing to creation's praise of its Lord. The east window by another Victorian, C.E. Tute, portrays through the imagery of a pelican and her nestlings the Creator's care for nature.

The poets too to some extent rectified the anthropocentric emphasis. Gerald Manley Hopkins protested against man as dominator. 'Why do men then now not reckon his rod? Generations have trod, have trod, have trod.' For him, as for Loyola, man should find God in creation.

Glory be to God for dappled things—

For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;

For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;

Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings.

Francis Thompson testified to the interrelation within nature.

All things by immortal power

Near and far

Hiddenly

To each other linked are,

There canst not stir a flower

Without troubling of a star.

For Chesterton everything in nature was a near miracle and Christ was Lord of all. 'All the flowers looked up at Him, And all the stars looked down.' T.S. Eliot gave a wise warning with characteristic brevity. 'A wrong attitude towards nature implies somewhere a wrong attitude towards God. And the result is inevitable doom.'

It is difficult to evaluate the contribution of Teilhard de Chardin, for he was not everywhere acknowledged by his contemporaries. But Julian Huxley was moved by Teilhard's brilliant insight that at the origin of man, the beginning of the noosphere, 'man discovers that he is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself.'<sup>21</sup> Efforts being made today to restore the biblical balance are often indebted to Teilhard.<sup>22</sup>

Although Vatican II had lamentably little to say about the environment except within the context of nuclear war, the Council Fathers, many of whom were from the third world, did make a helpful observation when they acknowledged the wisdom of technologically undeveloped peoples.

The future of the world stands in peril unless wiser men are forthcoming. It should also be pointed out that many nations, poorer in economic goods, are quite rich in wisdom and can offer noteworthy advantages to others. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 15)

On the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* Pope John Paul II, almost unnoticed, took a step towards restoring the balance. In an encyclical on work otherwise as exclusively man-centred as traditional social teaching the Pope mentioned 'intolerably' polluted nature as a worrying factor. 'There is', he said, 'the growing realization that the heritage of nature is limited and that it is being intolerably polluted.' The Pope added that changes will have to take place. 'These changes may perhaps mean unemployment, at least for a time, or the need for retraining. They will very probably involve a reduction or a less rapid increase in material well-being for the more developed countries.'<sup>23</sup>

Six years later the Pope brought together the themes of third-world wisdom, care for the environment and sharing. He praised the Maoris of New Zealand for their 'acknowledgement of the spiritual dimension in every aspect of life; a profound reverence for nature and the environment; a sense of community, assuring every individual that he or she belongs; loyalty to family and a great willingness to share.'<sup>24</sup>

In a subsequent letter on peace, in 1987, the Pope almost certainly had the Pacific in mind when he condemned nuclear testing in the third world and the dumping there of products too dangerous for use where they are manufactured.

A more open sharing of applicable technological advances with less technologically advanced countries becomes an ethical imperative of solidarity, as does a refusal to make of such countries the testing area for doubtful experiments or a dumping ground for questionable products.<sup>25</sup>

A few weeks later France announced that nuclear testing in the Pacific would continue. In Mexico, however, the six bishops of Vera Cruz endorsed conservationists' arguments for a halt to the construction of a nuclear power station on Laguna Verde.<sup>26</sup> In England Cardinal Hume referred to the connection between care for the environment and care for persons. 'We must treat our environment and each other with great respect.'<sup>27</sup> In April 1987 a Catholic bishops conference finally issued a pastoral letter on stewardship of nature. The bishops of the Dominican Republic stated that 'the ideal of work as unlimited control and exploitation of matter is false. The search for profit and the

maximum yield from production as an end in itself is wrong.’<sup>28</sup> In May Haiti’s bishops followed with a statement asking Catholics to vote for politicians seeking solutions to what the bishops call ecological and social ‘disasters’.

In recent years, therefore, and especially since Chernobyl, a few Christian leaders have begun to refocus the balance in an authentic Christian anthropology which recognises that, while human beings must, take from the earth what is necessary for man, they must also respect and reverence the earth which is included in God’s covenant.

These welcome utterances are not enough, however. In June 1972 the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm. There was encouragement but little follow up from the Church. In 1980 President Carter published the frightening ‘Global 2000 Report to the President’. The Church has yet to respond. Indeed, the NCCB’s recent statement on the economy is all too familiar in its sterilized picture of economic modern man as if he were separate from other living creatures and the rest of nature. In October 1982 the United Nations General Assembly passed a brief but excellent Charter for Nature, sponsored by Zaire and opposed only by the Reagan government. Church leaders have yet to print it, let alone quote it. In Spring, 1987, the United Nations Committee on Environment and Development published *Our Common Future*, a book that should be in every house and the subject for discussion groups in every diocese. Yet the Church has given this crucial report for mankind’s future no official recognition.<sup>29</sup> The forthcoming Synod on the Laity should address itself to what the World Commission calls ‘sustainable development’ and demand that all baptized persons join in the action to reconcile man with nature. Delegates and *periti* could even give example by doing without motor cars for the duration of the Synod. Should such prophetic witness burst upon Rome in the autumn it would not be premature to say the Church is greening.

- 1 Charlene Spretnak and Fritjof Capra, *Green Politics, The Global Promise*, London, 1985, p. 82.
- 2 C.H. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament*, Philadelphia, 1964, p. 14. Cf. E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, London, 1974, p. 11.
- 3 Stanislas Lyonnet, *Redemption of the Universe*, Collegeville, 1965, p. 432.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 425. Cf. Christopher Butler, *An Approach to Christianity*, London, 1981, pp. 243–244.
- 5 Luke T. Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, London, 1981, pp. 11–21.
- 6 Clement of Alexandria, *Who is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* XIII.
- 7 Jerome, *Liber Contra Vigilantium*, 17.
- 8 St. Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict*, Justin McCann, trans., London, 1970, p. 40 *et passim*.
- 9 David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England*, Cambridge, 1940, pp. 6–7, 19–20.
- 10 Francis of Assisi, *The Canticles of the Sun, Omnibus Source*, Chicago, 1980, pp. 130–131.

- 11 *Summa Theologiae*, I, 47, 1.
- 12 William Anderson, *The Rise of the Gothic*, London, 1986.
- 13 In Matthew Fox, *Cry of the Environment*, Santa Fe, 1984, p. 90.
- 14 Hildegard of Bingen, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*, Santa Fe, 1982, p.65.
- 15 Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, Westminster, 1949, pp. 75–76.
- 16 Bede Griffiths, 'Your Church is Too Western', *The Tablet*, 7 February, 1987, p. 138. (Letter)
- 17 John Macquarrie, *The Faith of the People of God*, London, 1972, p. 112.
- 18 Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, in *The Papal Encyclicals*, Anne Freemantle, ed., N.Y., 1963, pp. 184–5.
- 19 *Pastoral Letters of the American Hierarchy, 1792–1970*, Hugh J. Nolan, ed., Huntingdon, 1971, p. 475.
- 20 As long ago as 1971 I observed in this journal that the churches should confront together the looming environmental crisis. Cf. E.P. Echlin, 'The Uniate Model and Anglican Ministry', *New Blackfriars*, September 1971, p. 396.
- 21 Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, London, 1958, p. 243.
- 22 Sean McDonagh, *To Care for the Earth*, London, 1986, pp. 77–89.
- 23 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, London, (CTS), 1981, p. 7.
- 24 *The Tablet*, 6 December, 1986, p. 1309.
- 25 Pope John Paul II, 'Development and Solidarity: Two Keys to Peace', 8, *The Tablet*, 3 January, 1987, p. 22.
- 26 *The Tablet*, 6 December, 1986.
- 27 Cardinal Hume, Christmas Message 1986, *The Tablet*, 22/27 December, 1986, p. 1396.
- 28 'Ethics of Ecology', *The Tablet*, 16 May 1987, p. 528.
- 29 United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford and New York, 1987.

## The Church and the Trinity II: The Church of the Son

Geoffrey Preston OP

*The second part of the trilogy which we are publishing to mark the tenth anniversary of Geoffrey Preston's death.*

'In one Spirit we were all baptised into one body' (1 Cor. 12 : 13a). Repentance and faith give a man *koinōnia*—participation—with the Holy Spirit and by virtue of that partaking he has *koinōnia* too with all his fellow-Christians who are partakers with him of the same Spirit. He belongs to and within the communion of holy people, of the holy people who share holy things, the sacraments and mysteries of the Church. But the body into which we were all baptised by the one Spirit is itself the body of the Son, the body of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God made man. The Church, the body of the Messiah, the messianic community, is *koinōnia* with Jesus Christ as well as *koinōnia* with the Holy Spirit.