



# The Holy See and the Global Environmental Movements

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*Laudato Si* has garnered acclaim from world leaders and actors who support care for the environment. The encyclical has received praise for its ability to communicate the Church's environmental views to the secular world. Yet the views of the Holy See in global environmental issues prior to *Laudato Si* have received inadequate attention. We conduct a historical review of the Holy See's involvement in United Nations environmental efforts from the mid-20th Century to the present day. This reflects much of the work done in the late 20th Century by local dioceses all over the world. In doing so, we draw from the Holy See's record of apostolic letters and speeches penned by Popes and various Church officials in the 20th Century, which we draw from the Vatican archives and libraries. We show that a clear critique of industrial pollution first emerged in the official addresses and letters penned by Pope Paul VI in the early 1960s. We also show that the Holy See has joined the global community on the pursuit of sustainable development that promotes human dignity, and the right to development and to a healthy environment for all, mainly the poorest populations. We argue that *Laudato Si* is better thought of as a culmination of the Catholic Church's social teachings, which state that concern for the environment means respect for human life and dignity, promotion of the common good and the virtue of solidarity, and exercising responsibility to the poor and vulnerable. These are principles that align closely with the secular discourse on sustainable development.

**Keywords:** *Laudato si*, sustainable development, moral authority, United Nations, Food and Agriculture Organization, Holy See, environment

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the most challenging issues in the multi-dimensional fields of environment and development policy has been the successful implementation of long-term sustainable development. Since both the objectives of environmental and development policies are to improve the quality of life of people, environmental considerations should be a central component when formulating and implementing development policies. However, development policies have had limited impact on poverty alleviation, and often have worsened the environmental situation globally, making it a challenge to relate development to the opportunities and limitations created by the natural resources base of all human activities (Tortajada, 2015).

As actors in society, formal and informal institutions are expected to contribute to discussions on development models that are sustainable over the long-term. For instance, environment-related problems are associated with poverty, health, equality, human rights and security (Söderbaum and Tortajada, 2011).

A key institutional actor that has consistently brought attention to the rights of the people and the care of the environment has been the Holy See. More recently, it has been Pope Francis who, with his famed encyclical, *Laudato Si*, has garnered significant acclaim from world leaders and actors who support care for the environment. The encyclical has received praise for its call for environmental protection through the use of compelling narratives and other communication devices (Tilche and Nociti, 2015; Adams, 2016; Christie et al., 2019; McKim, 2019; Molino, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Within the mainstream discourse on environmental issues, the encyclical serves as an example of a major religious institution placing unprecedented attention on wide-scale secular problems of environmental degradation.

While *Laudato Si* is most commonly associated with Pope Francis's social teachings, the encyclical may also be treated as a focused exposition of the Catholic Church's position on environmental issues in the second decade of the 21st Century. In the years leading to its publication, multiple officials appointed by the Holy See have discussed issues about the natural environment at various high-level international meetings on development, environment and agriculture, emphasizing themes which would later resurface in Pope Francis's encyclical. These include the Open Working meeting at the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2013 and the UN Climate Summit in 2014 (Chullikatt, 2013; Parolin, 2014). Present-day secular discourse on environment and conservation has warmly received such remarks, and has welcomed the Catholic Church and her current Pope as an influential voice in addressing the ongoing ecological crisis. Researchers have analyzed the encyclical's communicative potential at key global policy events, such as the Paris Climate Agreement (Eckmann, 2016), and the 2030 Development Agenda (Schmieg et al., 2017). In sum, the encyclical has firmly established the Church's presence within the global discussions on environmental protection, and her ability to communicate religious views of environmental conservation to the secular world (Cox, 2013; Damian, 2015; Heald, 2016; Kelly, 2016; Pian, 2018; Pou-Amérigo, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

Careful scrutiny of the Vatican's archives and libraries, beginning from 1948, reveals that the Church has embraced care for the created natural environment as part of its body of doctrine long before the ecological crisis became part of the global discourse. Officials in the Catholic Church have also spoken throughout the 20th Century in various global fora with representatives of governments, non-governmental organizations, and activist movements, urging them to consider the implications of their actions on the created environment.

Speeches made by Church officials on development and environmentalism find their roots in the papacies of Paul VI and John Paul II in the mid-20th Century<sup>3</sup>. Both Popes spoke extensively about infrastructural development and the importance of agricultural economies—issues at the heart of 20th Century global concern—and frequently argued for their interconnected relationship with the natural environment (Paul VI, 1965; Paul VI, 1970; Paul VI, 1972; John Paul II, 1991; John Paul II, 1994; John Paul II, 1995; John Paul II, 1999; John Paul II, 2001; John Paul II, 2005; John Paul II, 2011). The Catholic Church's teachings on human dominion and the natural environment have not been of domination or instrumental use, but of responsible human activity that has emphasized stewardship and care and a moral obligation to care for the environment. These teachings have been woven into speeches and letters made by several Popes and official representatives of the Catholic Church to the global environmental movement (Keenan, 2002).

The Catholic Church is the only religious organization that participates in meetings organized by the United Nations (UN) as a country. The Holy See, is under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome, which is geographically bounded within the Vatican City State. Following the Second World War, the Holy See supported the establishment of international organizations, and understood itself as a pilgrim on a spiritual mission to offer a message of peace and respect for the dignity of human persons to the world (Melnyk, 2009). Part of this mission was to form relations with the UN and its affiliated agencies, funds, commissions, committees, and programmes. These relations include those with the global environmental movement that was gaining increasing traction within the UN body of organizations (Melnyk, 2009). Within this paper, we understand the global environmental movement to refer to the body of UN initiatives that concern themselves with agriculture, sustainable development, and the natural environment. Such initiatives include the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), and the various landmark world conferences held under the aegis of the UN that seek to bring environmental issues to the forefront of international affairs. In the latter half of the 20th Century, the Holy See proactively maintained a congenial relationship with the global environmental movement, frequently speaking at its conferences and meetings, while providing support and guidance.

The Holy See's position on environmental ethics has been key to advancing progress towards achieving sustainable development. The world has to be united by a vision that is ethical. The social doctrines and the moral teachings of the Church have been an essential component to build such a global vision (Sachs, 2013).

<sup>1</sup>Hours after it was released, Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, welcomed the encyclical and praised its timely publication (Ban, 2015). Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general, also issued a statement in support of the encyclical (Annan, 2015).

<sup>2</sup>See, for instance, Elizabeth Dias's analysis and praise of Pope Francis and the Church. Dias (2015) *Pope Francis Urges Climate-Change Action in Encyclical*. Time. Retrieved from <https://time.com/3925736/pope-francis-climate-change-encyclical-laudato-si/>.

<sup>3</sup>See the statement made to the ad hoc working group "Towards A Global Pact for the Environment", held in New York on 5 September 2018 (Auza, 2018). See also Welch (2015) *Vatican was Going Green Long Before Pope's Climate Decree*. National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/06/150616-pope-climate-francis-vatican-global-warming-green-solar-carbon-sustainable/>.

In this paper, we provide an overview of the Holy See's involvement in international environmental efforts from the mid-20th Century to the present day. We show that an unequivocal critique of the environmental consequences of industrial pollution first emerged in the official addresses and letters penned by Pope Paul VI. In doing so, we argue that *Laudato Si* is better thought of as a culmination of the Catholic Church's social teachings—her approach toward questions concerning life in human society—together with her interaction with environmental movements over the past century. While the Catholic Church has remained aware of environmental issues and its impact on the lives of people, it has set itself apart from secular institutions by integrating environmentalism with Catholic-Christian teachings, and guiding human social development by encouraging more enlightened attitudes toward the environment (Kasi 2010, 351).

This paper is primarily a history of the Catholic Church's environmental stance, and an interpretive exposition of its role in global environmental movements, tracing the Holy See's involvement with UN environmental organizations from the early to late 20th Century. As such, we proceed in the following sections with a chronological analysis of selected addresses and interventions made by Popes Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Pope Francis, as well as various officials appointed by the Holy See, to UN agriculture and environmental organizations and conferences. Since the headquarters of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization is in Rome, Vatican has taken a special interest in discussions at FAO. Within the span of each papacy, we discuss the ways that each Pope supported or advised the UN, and trace how their views were closely aligned with various global environmental movements from the early 20th Century to the present day.

## POPE PIUS XII—MARCH 2, 1939–OCTOBER 9, 1958

The first recorded meeting between the Holy See and an agency of the United Nations was on the 21st of February, 1948. Eugenio Pacelli, elected Pope Pius XII, provided an address at a meeting between delegates from the European Nations and the FAO, three years after its founding in 1945 (Thompson, 1943).<sup>4</sup> The meeting was between member governments of the FAO, and led to the formation of the Indo-Pacific Fisheries Council, tasked with augmenting and maintaining fishery resources in regional water bodies.

This first meeting between the Holy See and the FAO hinted briefly at the need for cooperative efforts between nation-states natural environment that the Holy See would gradually escalate in

the latter half of the 20th Century. Pius XII congratulated the United Nations for its foresight in establishing an organization dedicated to food and agricultural problems around the world. He then described the unstable living conditions of rural communities, remarking that their geographical location and level of development rendered them prone to the capricious afflictions of drought, war and economic forces. Pius XII proposed an ethic for international humanitarian aid: “that each nation, by collaborating with others, can better attend to the well-being and needs of all through growth, development and the best use of each country's resources” (Pius XII, 1948, 1).

Pius XII would embellish these remarks on the importance of international cooperation to aid undernourished populations in his address to the seventh Conference Session of the FAO, held five years later in 1953. The address, held in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican City, focused on the imbalance of food distribution throughout the world. Although Pope Pius XII repeated his stance of collaboration, he also emphasized that the productive capabilities of developing states warranted special attention. Apart from granting adequate resources and assistance, Pius XII encouraged the FAO to allow new workers to acclimatize to their tasks and make the most of the aid provided to them by cultivating “interest and personal initiative” among agricultural workers (Pius XII, 1953, 2). Redistribution was thus not the only prerogative of the Pope; it was also imperative that workers gain the ability to fend for themselves, and eventually sustain their community's food sources independently.

Pius XII's discussion of these problems, though a norm in present-day discourse, was innovative for his day. His papacy took place in a time of nascent globalization, where markets and economies were becoming increasingly volatile. Many of his prescriptions were prescient, anticipating the present environmental crises with its predicaments of rapidly dwindling resources and mass migration. Pius XII was keenly aware that a precarious global economy ran the risk of driving desperate farmers to seek different means of subsistence, prompting an ecological exodus that would bring a slew of complex problems. As a consequence of manufactured goods overshadowing food markets, “the depopulation of the countryside (would be) accentuated,” providing a new series of social problems (Pius XII, 1957, 1).

Pius XII's support of the FAO was the beginning of collaborations between the Holy See and the United Nations that would progress further long after his papacy.<sup>5</sup> These issues would be raised again by Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, and embellished in their respective environmental views (John XXIII, 1959; John XXIII, 1961a; John XXIII, 1961b; John XXIII, 1963; Paul VI, 1965; Paul VI, 1970; Paul VI, 1972). His emphasis on an ethic of international cooperation, adopted by self-sufficient nation-states, would become a core theme in the Church's social doctrine, and his foresight in unbalanced markets would

<sup>4</sup>For a summary of the FAO constitution, see European Union External Action Treaties Office Database (n.d.), *Constitution of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)*, retrieved from <https://ec.europa.eu/world/agreements/prepareCreateTreatiesWorkspace/treatiesGeneralData.do?step=0&redirect=true&treatyId=470>.

<sup>5</sup>Apart from his addresses to the FAO, Pacelli also participated in several other UN meetings, on matters ranging from public information to relief and rehabilitation. He gave multiple addresses to the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in 1945, and spoke to the UN coordinating committee for public information in 1956.

eventually form a primary component in its stance on the environment and the economy.

## JOHN XXIII—OCTOBER 28, 1958—JUNE 3, 1963<sup>6</sup>

Pius XII's successor, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, was elected Pope John XXIII, and maintained a similar stance of cooperation to encourage self-sufficiency as the basis for maintaining a healthy agricultural market. However, he introduced a new approach: establishing self-sufficiency by drawing from the earth's resources. In his addresses to the 10th and 11th Conference Sessions of the FAO on policy trends in food markets, held in Rome from 31st October to November 20, 1959 and 4th to November 24, 1961 respectively, John XXIII praised the organization's efforts to better distribute agricultural resources, echoing the sentiments of his predecessor (John XXIII, 1959; John XXIII, 1961a). He would encourage new aspirations in a message delivered to a special meeting of the organization on the *Freedom from Hunger* campaign.<sup>7</sup> This campaign, launched by the FAO in 1963, was an initiative that brought together governments, non-governmental organizations and representatives of citizen groups to tackle the challenge of growing hunger and malnutrition in the world during the 1960s and 1970s.

In his message to the Special Meeting of the FAO on March 14, 1963, John XXIII stated that “modern means of investigation provide a glimpse of the still almost undiscovered treasures hidden in the depths of the earth and in the seas. It is man's duty to use the gifts of intelligence and will which he has received in his striving to develop these immense riches. But it is also the immediate duty of society . . . to bring concrete assistance to those of its members who are deprived of the minimum essential for the normal growth of their personality” (John XXIII, 1963, 1). Like his predecessor, John XXIII emphasized the need to coordinate global efforts, and also expressed unique sentiments to assist developing regions of the world by better harnessing natural resources for their benefit. John XXIII cited the exponential advances in technological progress and globalized connectivity characteristic of his day, and remarked that the use of natural resources ought to ultimately lift the poor from destitution and pursue the common good (John XXIII, 1963, 1).

John XXIII's remarks on food production and distribution find close parallel with his views on another relevant issue of global interest during his papacy: underdeveloped sources of energy. In his address to the Conference on New Sources of

Energy, organized by the UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs and held in Rome at the end of August 1961, John XXIII remarked: “in our times, in what may be called the technical age of man, the possible uses of energy are increasing enormously: not only energy of the traditional kind but also energy which comes from sources which have so far been used little or not at all, such as the Sun or the wind or even the waters and vapours hidden in the bowels of the earth: solar energy, wind energy, geothermal energy” (John XXIII, 1961a, 1). In this area, the Catholic Church was well ahead of its time. Renewable sources of energy started getting traction in various UN fora around the post 1975-era.

John XXIII was keenly aware of the potential for technology to address the problems of his day. Yet he was also careful to qualify that potential for developmental progress did not legitimize arbitrary goals. His observations of the unusual expansion of energy sources for human use were always accompanied by his appeal to their benevolent applications. In line with his stance toward harnessing natural resources, technology and human ingenuity were to be channelled to further support underdeveloped nations.

## PAUL VI—JUNE 21, 1963 TO AUGUST 6, 1978

Giovanni Battista Montini, elected as Pope Paul VI, witnessed many important turns in 20th Century history. Paul VI was the first pope in history to enter the United States and personally address the United Nations General Assembly about the debilitating effects of immoderate industrial growth on the environment.

In October of 1965, Paul VI travelled from Rome to New York City. During his visit to the United Nations Headquarters, Paul VI gave an official address to the General Assembly (Paul VI, 1965). His address was both an encomium and an exhortation, where he praised the organization's efforts to lift the poor from poverty, while urging it to continue its mission to bring peace and harmony to states around the world. In his address, Paul VI iterated the stance of self-sufficiency put forth by his predecessors, remarking that humanitarian organizations should seek to cultivate the ability for men to flourish (Paul VI, 1965). Like John XXIII, Pope Paul VI considered that it was necessary to build on the ability of workers to sustain themselves independent of aid. This policy of self-sufficiency was essential to implementing the United Nation's program of harmony between the states (Paul VI, 1965, 6).

Despite this amicable stance, Paul VI concluded his address with an ominous warning. In commenting on 20th Century leaps in human progress, Paul VI cautioned: “the danger comes neither from progress nor from science, which, if well used, can, on the contrary, solve many of the serious problems that afflict humanity. The real danger is in man, who has increasingly powerful instruments, capable of leading both to ruin and to the highest conquests” (Paul VI, 1965, 6). Technological development and human wellbeing were inadequately matched, and Paul VI sought to communicate that progress in civilization had to be built on timeless spiritual and moral

<sup>6</sup>The highest point of Pope John XXIII's papacy was The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, known as the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, the most important event in the contemporary history of the Catholic Church. Pope John XXIII summoned the Ecumenical Council with the hope to modernize the Catholic Church. The council aimed to set out Church teaching on several issues for the modern Church and laity. See: *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), II Vatican Council, Rome, December 7th, *Gaudium* 1965.

<sup>7</sup>For a detailed history of the campaign, see <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000063738>.

principles, rather than the pragmatism that was becoming the increasing norm in industrialized societies during the late 20th Century.

In the years following Paul VI's visit, substantial changes would take place throughout the world, echoing the relevance and the gravity of his concerns. Civil disputes and violent conflict erupted between various nation-states, as the threat of war loomed in the global community. Undeterred by global turmoil, Paul VI embarked on numerous journeys to different parts of the world, promoting his policy of international peace, eventually earning himself the nickname, "pilgrim Pope."<sup>8</sup> Peace would become a major theme of Paul VI's papacy.

The 1970s was an important decade for environmentalism in the Church, as it was where such issues formally entered the purview of the Holy See. In his next major interaction with the United Nations General Assembly on October 4, 1970, Paul VI reminded the committee of the message he gave five years before during his visit to the organization's headquarters in October 1965 (Paul VI, 1970). 1970 was the year that marked the 25th Anniversary of the founding of the United Nations, and Paul VI was invited to pen a message to the Secretary-General U Thant. The Pope emphasized his policy of the common good of nations over interests of state power by discussing ongoing movements of nuclear disarmament in the late 1960s, as well as the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which had been ratified in 1968 (Paul VI, 1970, 3).<sup>9</sup> Paul VI chastised the dominant mentality of channelling opportunities for agricultural progress into military and national interests, arguing that the newfound ability to harness resources from the earth ought to sustain struggling communities and promote universal human life. He called for a change of attitude, and claimed that "technical achievements, however admirable, do not of themselves bring moral advance. This change of attitude—to understand technology as a tool for progress, rather than progress itself—would resurface in Paul VI's future speeches on humanity's development, his activities, and the natural environment (Paul VI, 1971; Paul VI, 1972).

Paul VI's call for a renewed mindset was echoed by many representatives of the Holy See. For example, in November 1970, Cardinal Maurice Roy, the President of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, penned a message to the UN Secretary General, U Thant. Cardinal Roy urged the organization to formulate better ways to manage the planet's resources, and to avoid extravagant levels of pollution in order not to endanger developmental efforts in other parts of the world (Roy, 1970).

On 14 May, 1971, a year after his address to the 25th Anniversary meeting of the United Nations, Pope Paul VI released an apostolic letter entitled *Octogesima Adveniens*, echoing and expanding upon the statements made in his

address (Paul VI, 1971). This apostolic letter was the first official document published by the Holy See that explicitly condemned humanity's exploitation of nature and the degradation of the global environment. With the rise of industrial development in richer sections of the world, the environment had suffered significant damage, resulting in pollution, refuse, and new illnesses (Keenan, 2002, 16). The Pope further noted that exploiting and subverting nature was concomitant with enslavement of vulnerable populations around the world (Paul VI, 1971; Keenan, 2002).

Paul VI's most significant contribution to environmentalism, apart from his Apostolic letter, is likely found in his address to a landmark conference held in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. This conference was focused on the human environment, and would later become known in UN history as the 1972 Stockholm conference.<sup>10</sup> On the first of June 1972, Paul VI penned a letter to Maurice F. Strong, the Secretary-General of the then newly founded United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), which would be used as an opening address to the landmark conference.

In his letter, Paul VI praised the initiative and expressed support toward its installation in the United Nations body of organizations (Paul VI, 1971; Keenan, 2002). The interdependence between humans and the environment formed the basis of Paul VI's address to the conference. In his address, Paul VI described this symbiotic relationship: "the environment essentially conditions man's life and development, while man, in his turn, perfects and ennobles his environment through his presence, work and contemplation" (Paul VI, 1972, 1). For Paul VI, the natural environment found its fulfilment *in* human use, and was dependent on human action to realize its purpose (Keenan, 2002, 22). In turn, human flourishing was the product of conditioning *by* the natural environment. Exponential development in infrastructure and rapid urbanization was an enterprise that had to be kept in check, lest it upset the fragile balance between human beings and their ecological system (Paul VI, 1972, 1). Both were linked, and shared a common temporal future.

These remarks led to Paul VI's argument for the responsible use of resources, and the prioritizing of the common good over economic development. Technical solutions toward growing problems of pollution in industry had become one of the primary focus of the newly established UN environment organization, UNEP. Many states were investing in methods to sustain their economic development trying not to harm the environment.

In his message to Mr. Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Human Environment, Paul VI urged him to consider that interdependence between humans and the environment made it necessary to curb the excesses of industrial and technological progress. In light of such interdependence, "the problem of the environment cannot be

<sup>8</sup>For a full list of visits and apostolic journeys during Pope Paul VI's papacy, see <https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/travels.index.html>. See also Collins (2018) Paul VI: Pilgrim Pope. Liturgical Press (Collegeville: MN).

<sup>9</sup>For a detailed report on the historic conference, see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/milestones/humanenvironment>. See also [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.48/14/REV.1](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.48/14/REV.1).

<sup>10</sup>For a detailed report on the historic conference, see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/milestones/humanenvironment>. See also [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.48/14/REV.1](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/CONF.48/14/REV.1).

tackled with technical measures alone” (Paul VI, 1972). Policies that merely reduce the negative effects of industry were insufficient, and a greater understanding of “common destiny” (Paul VI, 1972), or the common good, was necessary.

Technological methods to eliminate pollution would not succeed should they not be accompanied by a change in the values, meanings and goals of developed nations. Paul VI called for a shift in mentality and argued that efforts to reduce pollution had to be carried out in such a way that used natural resources in moderation and controlled the growth of material wealth. Widespread pollution was an ethical issue, rather than an industrial problem, and a sense of moral responsibility ought to accompany efforts to moderate the growth of resource-heavy industries. All economic efforts should be carried out in an ethical spirit.

These claims and proposals of interdependency and a joint responsibility toward a shared natural environment were unusual for Paul VI’s day. Many governments were preoccupied with the struggle to eradicate poverty and alleviate inegalitarian effects of the extant international economic order.<sup>11</sup> Yet Paul VI encouraged integrating economic development with an environmental spirit built upon ethics. These comments were reflective of the purpose and intention of the Stockholm Conference’s proceedings.

A decade after the conference, the UNEP held its 10th session in Nairobi, Kenya, from 20th May to 2nd June, 1982, to review the plans adopted and measure the progress achieved since the Stockholm Conference. These plans included 26 principles concerning the environment and development, as well as a set of 109 recommendations.<sup>12</sup> The Nairobi session soon led to the Nairobi Declaration on the State of Worldwide Environment<sup>13</sup>.

## JOHN PAUL II—OCTOBER 16, 1978 TO APRIL 2, 2005

Karol Wojtyła’s influence following his election as Pope John Paul II in 1978 was wide in its reach, spanning ecumenical efforts amongst various faiths to intellectual reforms in the ivory towers of the academy. In his various addresses to the various United Nations assemblies, John Paul II embraced a vision of international relations based on non-economic goals,

equitable sharing of resources, and cooperative efforts among nations (John Paul II, 1980a; John Paul II, 1980b; John Paul II, 1985; John Paul II, 1989; John Paul II, 1991; John Paul II, 1995; John Paul II, 2001). This was largely reflective of approaches to humanitarian policy that was building up in the social doctrine of the church prior to John Paul II’s papacy.

John Paul II’s extensive academic work in philosophy, together with his reflections on humanitarian and economic policy, is key to understanding his views on the natural environment. As such, it is necessary to first carry out a brief overview of John Paul II’s humanitarian vision, and the relevant aspects of his philosophical thought. We focus here on the aspects that directly pertain to John Paul II’s environmentalism.

In his address to the 21st session of the FAO held in Rome in 1981, John Paul II echoed Pius XII’s vision of humanitarian aid for the sake of building economic independence, and further entrenched the Holy See’s ideal of an international community with priorities to alleviate the poorest of its members from destitution and strife (John Paul II, 1981a). John Paul II remarked that “developing countries stand in need of technical and financial assistance in order to become self-sufficient in agricultural production, and so be able to feed their own people” (John Paul II, 1981b, 3). This was particularly relevant in speaking against practices of lending and borrowing that incurred debt and sowed animosity between countries, as John Paul II encouraged governing bodies to avoid unpropitious investments obtained through burdensome loans from partisan funding sources (John Paul II, 1981a).

While John Paul II echoed many of his predecessors’ attitudes toward the environmental initiatives of the United Nations, his academic training also crept into his official addresses and speeches (John Paul II, 1985; John Paul II, 1989; John Paul II, 1991; John Paul II, 1995; John Paul II, 2001). John Paul II’s emphasis on the irreducible dignity of the human person in his speeches on global development was likely drawn from the doctrine of personalism, which ran throughout his intellectual writings. This was the body of thought that placed the intrinsic value of the individual over that of her community (Wojtyła, 2008). Majorie Keenan describes personalism as follows: “the human person is ontologically different from the rest of creation. This is not an abstract affirmation but rather a principle of action . . . the ultimate criterion of all true progress is the human person and his or her good, human persons and their common good” (Keenan, 2000, 34). In his remarks on economic and societal development, John Paul II applied this principle and argued that “true development takes as its criterion the human person with all the needs, just expectations and fundamental rights that are his or hers” (John Paul II, 1981b, 2).

In applying his humanitarian vision and philosophy of personalism to the world’s social and environmental issues, John Paul II saw the global circuit of sovereign states as a network of interconnected nations, each of which were only materially independent up to a certain point. The dignity of humans became central to his exhortations for governments to sustain agricultural development and food production on a national level. This attentiveness to an interconnected world and an emphasis on human dignity was weaved into John

<sup>11</sup>See for instance: Vernon, 1971, *Sovereignty at Bay: The Multinational Spread of U.S. Enterprises* (New York: Basic Books, 1971); Barnett and Mueller, 1974, *Global Reach: The Power of the Multinational Corporations* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974); Moyn, 2018, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018): 89–118.

<sup>12</sup>Ottinger (2005). Stockholm Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. *Compendium of Sustainable Energy Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 91–95.

<sup>13</sup>United Nations Environment Programme (May 19, 1982). *Nairobi Declaration on the State of Worldwide Environment*. Retrieved from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/international-legal-materials/article/united-nations-environment-programme-nairobi-declaration-on-the-state-of-worldwide-environment/3F4936AD55114C6D1FAEC25FA26379C4>.

Paul II's stance on environmental protection and development, and was core to his understanding of the environmental problem.

## Pope John Paul II on the Environment

John Paul II's first direct public address on the natural environment was in a special conference organized by the FAO. In the World Conference on Fisheries Management and Development, which took place in Rome in June 1984, John Paul II noted the organization's movement away from industrial and profit-driven mechanisms and praised its return to agriculture as the primary source of global food production (John Paul II, 1984). Within the decade, the FAO had made conscious efforts to focus on non-technocratic solutions to agricultural problems, such as developing strategies for effective animal husbandry and better soil management in small-scale farms (FAO, 1984; de Freitas, 2000). The FAO recognized that the growing population of developing countries would bring an increase in demand for agricultural products, primarily within fishing industries. Yet accelerating large-scale industrial food production would not be effective, since such complex systems require large amounts of time and resources. The FAO could draw from traditional methods of agriculture in order to provide an immediate solution to hunger in small communities. The focus of the conference thus fell on small-scale fishing, in recognition of the larger role it played in national economies.

John Paul II's address to the conference was made in light of this focus. In discussing the economic prospects of developing countries, John Paul II remarked that a flourishing aquaculture was central to creating new employment opportunities in tight-knit communities (John Paul II, 1984, 1). Fishing industries were core to developing economies, and functioned as a main source of employment. Maintaining fish stocks in agricultural economies was central to sustaining the network of human activities. John Paul II concluded: "It is therefore the task of your Conference to re-examine the criteria already laid down with regard to agriculture in order to ensure not only technical and economic development but also the human development of individuals and communities" (John Paul II, 1984, 2).

John Paul II's remarks at the conference, though short, were seminal in their ability to connect economic development with a healthy natural environment. Indeed, John Paul II did not understand proponents for either side to remain engaged in a zero-sum game of interests, where one had to be sacrificed in order for the other to flourish. For John Paul II, creating employment and growing the economies of developing countries was heavily *dependent* on ensuring that aquatic environments were adequately replenished and managed. It was not a matter of finding a competitive balance between the economy and the environment, but of attending to one to establish and maintain the other. This observation breaks away from the false dichotomy between economy and environment that remains in traction even within the present-day discourse on climate change.

John Paul II's environmental stance was significantly influenced by his philosophy of personalism. John Paul II argued that human flourishing was the ends upon which environmental conservation efforts ought to be built. He

added to the secular narrative, with its focus on social change, by applying a uniquely philosophical lens over the issue of environment degradation. John Paul II argued that development and environmental conservation found its roots in the centrality of the human person. As entities endowed with reason, a major aspect of being human was to responsibly manage the earth's resources, such that any abuse would contravene their dignity *as* beings accorded dominion over the environment. This primacy of the human person, from which environmental stewardship and responsible action flowed, was unusual when compared with secular narratives that sought to flatten the hierarchy between human beings and the environment.

The integration of John Paul II's personalism with the Church's stance on the environment is most apparent in his speech to the United Nations in Nairobi, Kenya on August 18, 1985, where he cited Paul VI's address to the 1972 Stockholm conference (Keenan, 2002, 31; John Paul II, 1985). In referencing Paul VI's claim of the environment's fulfillment in human use, John Paul II encouraged care for the natural world. Yet he embellished Paul VI's ethic of moderation by adding that the Church approaches the protection of the environment from the viewpoint of the human person. In his speech, John Paul II emphasized that authority over the environment was not one of domination, but stewardship (John Paul II, 1985). He argued that human dignity made it necessary to exercise dominion over creation in a way that adequately serves the human family (John Paul II, 1985). Human personhood was to remain at the center of the environmental movement. John Paul II argued that "all ecological programmes must respect the full dignity and freedom of whoever might be affected by such programmes. Environment problems should be seen in relation to the needs of actual men and women, their families, their values, their unique social and cultural heritage" (John Paul II, 1985, 2). Development is therefore an essentially moral problem, and is closely linked with John Paul II's doctrine of human persons (Keenan, 2002, 32).

While John Paul II connected his speeches on ecology to food production and economic employment in developing countries, his remarks on environmental protection extended to the rest of the world. In his address to the 24th General Assembly of the FAO in Rome in 1987, John Paul II remarked that "imprudent practices have caused very serious damage to nature. Uncontrolled discharges have resulted in acid rain, trace substances in the environment and the contamination of the seas" (John Paul II, 1987, 4). Like Paul VI, who was concerned with environmental deterioration arising from industrial pollution, John Paul II was keen to note the exponential growth of industries in developed states, and sought to draw attention to the consequences of environmental deterioration that such growth would bring (Paul VI, 1972; John Paul II, 1987).

Within the Church, John Paul II was not the only figure in dialogue with the United Nations. Other prominent representatives of the Church also voiced their support for UN environmental programs, and drew from aspects of John Paul II's personalist philosophy. Archbishop Renato Martino, a cardinal in the diplomatic service of the Holy See, echoed similar sentiments in his statement to the landmark United Nations Conference on

Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Martino, 1992). This was repeated by Cardinal Angelo Sodano at a high-level segment of the same Conference about 10 days later (Keenan, 2002, 46; Sodano, 1992). In his address as head of the Holy See delegation, Martino stated that the problems of environment and development were fundamentally moral issues (Martino, 1992). Martino argued that environmental degradation and weak economies were not simply practical problems awaiting adequate solutions, but issues with moral questions. This had a significant impact on how such problems ought to be addressed. Martino explained: “for the ultimate purpose of environmental and developmental programmes is to enhance the quality of human life, to place creation in the fullest way possible at the service of the human family” (Martino, 1992). Echoing the Pope’s focus on human wellbeing, Martino sought to align the goals of environmental efforts to the good of the men and women in underdeveloped areas.

Other representatives of the Holy See also spoke at future global UN meetings that dealt with international cooperation on sustainable development (Keenan, 2002, 63). The most important of this was the 19th Special Session of the UN General Assembly, otherwise known as Rio + Five, which was held in New York in June of 1997.<sup>14</sup> In the statement delivered by Archbishop Tauran, Secretary of the Second Section of the Secretariat of State, the Holy See noted that the landmark conference in Rio de Janeiro emphasized the irreducible links between the environment, economics and equitable development. The discussions and results from the Rio conference had made it a duty to defend humanity by protecting nature (Keenan, 2002, 63).

Archbishop Martino’s interactions with UN organizations echoed similar sentiments. In addressing the growth of industrial activity around the world, Martino emphasized the need for prudence in all economic endeavours: “developing countries, in their legitimate ambition to improve their status and emulate existing patterns of development, will realize and counteract the danger that can derive to their people and to the world by the adoption of highly wasteful growth strategies hitherto widely employed” (Martino, 1992). The influence of John Paul II’s personalism was apparent in these remarks: development should not be pursued as an end in itself, and should be carried out in view toward human wellbeing and the broader eco-sphere. Martino would repeat these remarks a decade later at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002, a decade later, emphasizing human beings as the irreducible centre of sustainable development efforts (Martino, 2002).

These remarks by the Pope and other senior Church officials on the agricultural interdependence of states and global responsibility toward protecting the natural environment would be repeated throughout the latter half of John Paul II’s

pontificate (John Paul II, 1989; John Paul II, 1991; John Paul II, 1995). In the last decade of the 20th Century, John Paul II emphasized the indelible connections formed between socio-economic development and adequate environmental management, declaring that the protection of the natural environment has become an integral aspect of the development issue (John Paul II, 1989, 2, John Paul II, 2001). This connection between development and the environment was especially pertinent at the turn of the century, when the UN announced its plans for landmark development indicators: the Millennium Development Goals, announced on September 8, 2000.<sup>15</sup> Substantial research in the reception and implementation of these goals have repeatedly shown that issues in social and economic development cannot be decoupled from an adequate management of the global environmental system (Carpenter et al., 2009; Sachs, 2009; Selomane et al., 2015; Griggs et al., 2013). Plans to build self-sufficient food economies cannot be formulated without accounting for the complex forces affecting the sustainable renewal of natural resources.

John Paul II’s remarks were notably different from aspects of the mainstream ecological debate. Environmental activists would balk at the precedence with which the Church elevated human need and development, while lobbyists for resource-heavy industries would denounce the deep interconnections raised between human society and the environment.<sup>16</sup> Nationalists would decry the Church’s view of an indelible material interdependence between states, while cosmopolitans would denounce its insistence on self-sufficiency in agricultural growth and development. Despite the independence of his thought, John Paul II’s remarks were capable of speaking to many assumptions in the political sphere, and served to entrench the Holy See’s unique stance on human societies and the natural environment.

## **BENEDICT XVI—APRIL 19, 2005—FEBRUARY 28, 2013**

Joseph Ratzinger, following his election as Pope Benedict XVI, penned a letter to Mr Jacques Diouf, Director General of the FAO, on October 16, 2006, for the celebration of the 26th Annual World Food Day observance, held in Rome (Benedict XVI, 2006). In commenting on investments in food security, Benedict XVI immersed the phenomenon of agricultural labor, lamenting “society’s neglect of the agricultural sector” as a root cause of forced migration, conflict and strife (Benedict XVI, 2006, 1). Attention to the agricultural sector was based on a defense of the human person not unlike that promulgated by Benedict XVI’s predecessor, and emerged in opposition to the prevailing

<sup>15</sup>For further information on the MDGs, see <https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>. See also Kozak et al. (2012). *Global Poverty and Hunger: An Assessment of Millennium Development Goal #1*. *Journal of Poverty* 16: 469–485.

<sup>16</sup>Even within the Church, there were varying positions on Climate Change and the Environmental question. See for instance, Lieberman (2012). *The Catholic Church and Climate Change*. Yale Climate Connections. <https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2012/02/the-catholic-church-and-climate-change/>.

<sup>14</sup>This was a General Assembly special session to review the implementation of Agenda 21. See UN General Assembly (June 20, 1997), General Assembly Special Session to Review Implementation of Agenda 21 to meet at Headquarters, 23–27 June, <https://www.un.org/press/en/1997/19970620.GA9257.html>.

attitudes of environmental conservation that emphasized socio-economic objectives in its approach to agricultural reform. In his address, Benedict XVI argued that short-term economic gains were to be placed within the context of long-term planning for food security (Benedict XVI, 2006).

Yet Benedict XVI did not remain at the level of the individual person, and drew greater attention to communities and the place of society in a natural order of creation. This call for harmony between human communities and the natural environment was an appeal to prioritize the flourishing of the former without infringing on the good of the latter. In order to accomplish this, human communities had to be placed at the starting point of all agricultural activity. For Benedict XVI, this warranted attention to the basic unit of the “rural family” (Benedict XVI, 2006, 2). The Pope argued that “investment in the agricultural sector has to allow the family to assume its proper place and function, avoiding the damaging consequences of hedonism and materialism that can place marriage and family life at risk” (Benedict XVI, 2006, 2).

Secular affairs, for Benedict XVI, did not exclude the relevance of moral or religious ideas. An ethical core had to be weaved into public policy and the development of economic infrastructure, lest the failure of efforts to stave hunger and elevate poverty. Yet this was far from a critique of techno-rationality in international development. Despite criticisms that sought to vilify the Church as an institution hostile to scientific rationality and humanistic progress, Benedict XVI did not preclude technological solutions to social problems.<sup>17</sup> He repeatedly appealed to a scientific approach to social and environmental issues that took its core values from a natural order of life on earth. In his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2008, Benedict XVI argued that “international action to preserve the environment and to protect various forms of life on earth must not only guarantee a rational use of technology and science, but must also rediscover the authentic image of creation. This never requires a choice to be made between science and ethics: rather it is a question of adopting a scientific method that is truly respectful of ethical imperatives” (Benedict XVI, 2008, 2).

Like many of his predecessors, Benedict XVI emphasized the correct ordering of relationships between humans and the environment throughout his interactions with international organizations and governmental authorities. Toward the end of his papacy, Benedict XVI reaffirmed the Church’s teachings on right reason and proper order in addressing the most urgent of humanity’s problems. Benedict XVI insisted that collective efforts made across borders could not succeed if they sought only to meet selfish interests or generate wealth, and argued that cooperatives organizations established across borders were not effective because they complemented each other’s goals, but because they were better equipped to bring about the common good

(Benedict XVI, 2012, 2). This followed from remarks made by Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer, who provided the address at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro three months earlier (Scherer, 2012). Scherer, like Benedict XVI, argued that patterns of production and consumption were to be made in promotion of the common good, with an eye to safeguarding the wellbeing of the environment (Scherer, 2012).

## FRANCIS—MARCH 13, 2013—PRESENT

Our examination of the Holy See’s role and influence in the global environmental movement now allows us to examine Pope Francis’ writings on the environment in a renewed light. Although his papacy has, at present, become associated with his encyclical on the natural environment, Pope Francis’s reflections on harmful industrial production, environmental exploitation, and an interconnected human world emerged in his speeches and writings prior to the encyclical’s publication. These reflections were not only a foreshadowing of his environmental stance as laid out in the encyclical, but were *also* reflective of the Holy See’s environmental position throughout the latter 20th Century as discussed earlier.

Following his election as Bishop of Rome, Francis worked to further develop the Holy See’s cordial relations with the UN, penning several addresses and letters to FAO meetings (Francis, 2013a; Francis, 2014). In his first address to the FAO, given in June 2013 in Rome, Francis spoke about the importance of the dignity of the human person in “creating shared rules and structures capable of passing beyond purely pragmatic or technical approaches” (Francis, 2013b). Efforts to reform unjust global structures, instead of overtly focusing on making existing structures more efficient, ought to regard human beings as their final end. This meant that approaching hunger as a purely economic issue could not adequately address the extent of the problem. In his address to the FAO’s Director General, José Graziano da Silva, during World Food Day in 2013, Pope Francis similarly urged the organization not to reduce the global challenge of hunger to a purely economic issue of reforming food supply chains (Francis, 2013a). Instead, “to build a society that is truly human means to put the person and his or her dignity at the centre, always, and never to sell him out to the logic of profit (Francis, 2013b)”.

With these remarks, Francis echoed many of John Paul II’s environmental views (John Paul II, 1991; 1994; John Paul II, 1995; 1999; John Paul II, 2001; 2005; 2011). As elaborated earlier, John Paul II spoke against the economic mentality of establishing a competitive balance between economy and environment, and urged the UN to build policies with the view of the common good as its end. Like John Paul II, Francis similarly emphasized human dignity in establishing a more equitable societal order, and urged international organizations to move beyond merely technical and logistical approaches to addressing unjust global structures. Francis’s remarks are also reflective of John Paul II’s personalism: to place the common good of humans at the centre of developmental action. In repeatedly foregrounding human dignity over economic profit or societal development,

<sup>17</sup>See for instance Lavelle (2015) *Will Pope Francis’s climate message break through where others have failed?* Science. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2015/06/will-pope-francis-s-climate-message-break-through-where-others-have-failed>. For apologists of the Church’s embrace and support of scientific rationality, see Cloutier (2015) *The Catholic Church is not an Enemy of Science*. The New Republic. <https://newrepublic.com/article/122016/catholic-church-not-enemy-science>.

Francis sought to draw attention to the primacy of the person, and echoed foundational elements of John Paul II's philosophical thought.

Pope Francis also raised attention to developing communities around the world, emphasizing their particular affliction by environment-related threats. In his message for the World Food Day in 2014, Francis wrote that “defending rural communities from the serious threats posed by human action or natural disasters must not merely be a strategy but rather a form of permanent action aimed at promoting their participation in decision-making, at making appropriate technologies available, and extending their use, always with respect for the natural environment” (Francis, 2014). These sentiments were directed at involving rural communities in their efforts to protect their natural environment, and adapt to or mitigate impending environment-related events.

Pope Francis's remarks were strongly reminiscent of Pius XII's reflections on development and globalization (Paul VI, 1965; Paul VI, 1970; Paul VI, 1972). Pius XII's arguments for humanitarian aid were attentive to the ability of workers to build upon their knowledge and become self-sufficient. In calling for greater participation among rural communities, Francis echoed Pius XII's emphasis on developing the productive capabilities of labourers, and his exhortations to cultivate personal initiative in contributing to their line of work.

Pope Francis's views on human dignity, development and an interconnected world were not limited to his writings. In the years leading up to *Laudato Si's* publication, representatives of the Holy See provided statements on environmental issues that bore traces of John Paul II's personalism and Paul VI's reflections on international cooperation. In a 2013 statement, entitled “Water and Sanitation,” made at the Open Working Group on the UN Sustainable Development Goals at the Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See in New York, Archbishop Francis Chullikatt informed his audience that “it is serving the human person which must guide us, not the pursuit at any cost of economic incentives” (Chullikatt, 2013). Cardinal Pietro Parolin, at the UN Climate Summit, held in New York on September 23, 2014, similarly spoke about an “increasing awareness that the entire international community is part of one interdependent human family” (Parolin, 2014). The environmental views of the previous papacies were therefore similarly echoed by the Holy See's representatives well into the 21st Century.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our discussion of the respective stances on development and the environment throughout the 20th Century papacies of the Catholic Church has traced how the Holy See remained a staunch supporter of global environmental movements since their infancy. The Church's involvement with environmental issues began with efforts to address food and agricultural problems around the world. This was found in Pius XII support of the FAO's formation, and in his emphasis on agriculture as intrinsic to societal development. Pius XII's

support for UN initiatives was developed by John XXIII and Paul VI, who argued for the responsible use of resources, and for governments to prioritise the common good over economic development. It is also important to note that Pope John XXIII supported the use of renewable energy, including solar, wind and geothermal in 1963, well before the rest of the world.

In his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI stated that “development is the new name for peace,” and called for progressive development for societies trying to escape hunger, poverty, and endemic disease, as well as those seeking to improve their human qualities; and strive for fuller growth (Paul VI, 1967). As a response to Paul VI's message, the Food and Agriculture Organization helped launch the International Walk for Development (Thant, 1971).

John Paul II's views on the interrelationship between development and environment and their impacts on human dignity, together with Benedict XVI's conviction that there should be harmony between communities and their natural environment, further clarified the relationship between humans and the environment, and emphasized care for nature as intrinsic to the good of human society. *Laudato Si* is thus reflective of the Church's social teachings on the environment throughout the years, and represents the culmination of its views on responsible human activity in relation to the natural environment, or the common good.

The Catholic Church has remained a strong proponent of responsible economic activity, encouraging temperance toward consumption and a prudent use of natural resources. Moral obligation to care for creation has remained a central component of Catholic teaching, both in the early 20th Century and in present day discourse. Principles to guide the development of a just society are particularly applicable to the challenging social, political, economic and ecological questions of our time. These principles are aligned with the discourse on sustainable development, and have reinforced its relevance throughout the years.

The invitation of several Popes to attend key UN meetings has provided a great amount of gravitas to the message of the Catholic Church. One might argue that the Pope is one of the few global leaders with the ability to successfully communicate the views of the Church. His position has made him a moral authority on social issues, and he has remained an important voice in the promotion of sustainable development. Meeting human development goals while simultaneously sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the resources upon which economy and society depend are priorities that are shared by both the Church and the international community. The social teachings of the Catholic Church can therefore be considered pivotal in this regard. In addition to supporting care for the environment, the Church also promotes respect to human life and dignity, the pursuit of the common good, and the virtue of solidarity, as well as responsibility to the poor and vulnerable.

Although the Catholic Church has exercised its social influence in many ways, its vision has not been adequately followed by the Catholic faithful or implemented by local

dioceses, at times due to the lack of resources. Nevertheless, the Church remains a vocal, strong, and respected supporter of sustainable development within the international community.

As noted by Archbishop Martino during the 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development, “for the Holy See the problems of environment and development are, at their root, issues of a moral, ethical nature, from which derive two obligations: the urgent imperative to find solutions and the inescapable demand that every proposed solution meet the criteria of truth and justice” (Martino, 1992). The Holy See has joined the international community in the pursuit of sustainable development with the objective of achieving development that is just, extensive, and capable of providing the means for all to realize their potential.

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## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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