

New Scholars

REFRAMING JOSEPH CARDINAL BERNARDIN'S CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE IN THE LIGHT OF THE CRISIS OF OUR COMMON HOME AND POPE FRANCIS' INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

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Status Quaestionis and Aim of the Dissertation

The question underlying the dissertation is, "how can Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's consistent ethic of life, in the light of the crisis of our common home and informed by an integral ecology, serve as a moral vision that inseparably links care for our common home with the Christian duty of respecting, protecting, and promoting human life?" I attempted to answer the question through the threefold goals of the dissertation, namely: first, by performing a historical and

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theological analysis of the consistent ethic of life (CEL); second, by doing a similar historical and theological examination of integral ecology; and third, drawing from the insights of the first two goals and using a dialogical approach, by reframing the CEL in the light of the crisis of our common home and integral ecology.

Joseph Cardinal Bernardin delivered the first CEL in his December 6, 1983 Gannon Lecture “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue” at Fordham University. In this lecture, he linked together “right to life” issues (e.g., abortion, war, euthanasia, and capital punishment) with “quality of life” issues (e.g., poverty, care for the vulnerable, racism, and health care), the basis being the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of human life and, consequently, the personal and social responsibilities we have to protect and preserve the sanctity of human life in all its stages.¹ Building upon the final section of the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter on nuclear war “The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response” that linked war with reverence for all human life, Bernardin asserts that the Catholic position on abortion demands that the Church and society seek to influence a “heroic social ethic.”² In other words, in calling to stand for the protection of the right to life and the promotion of the rights that enhance life from “the womb to the tomb,” Bernardin seeks to rule out contradictory moral positions concerning the unique value of human life.

While some authors have praised the CEL for being a comprehensive moral vision,³ it is observed that it is still limited by the concerns of its time. A survey of Bernardin’s works that are available shows that he only mentioned the environment once but never elaborated it again.⁴ Indeed, Bernardin wanted to attend to ecological concerns but did not do so. It was not because doing so would be unfruitful but for credibility’s sake, Bernardin was advised

¹Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue,” Gannon Lecture, Fordham University, 6 December 1983, in *The Seamless Garment: Writings on the Consistent Ethic of Life*, ed. Thomas A. Nairn, OFM, New York: Orbis Books, 2008, 10–13.

²Bernardin, “A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue,” 12–13.

³See for example James J. Walter, “What Does Horizon Analysis Bring to the Consistent Ethic of Life?” in *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing Its Reception and Relevance*, ed. Thomas A. Nairn, OFM, New York: Orbis Books, 2008, 3–15.

⁴Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “The Challenges We Face Together: Reflections on Selected Questions for Archdiocesan Religious Educators,” in *Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin*, vol. 1, *Homilies and Teaching Documents*, edited by Alphonse P. Spilly, CPPS, with foreword by Roger Cardinal Mahony, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000, 177.

not to apply the CEL personally across too broad a spectrum of issues.⁵

However, we see more and more how the modern ecological crisis is not only threatening and destroying non-human life but also human life. It is in this light that I argue for a reframed CEL that is sensitive to the modern ecological crisis. Specifically, this would mean that to care for and respect human life and dignity inevitably means to care for and defend our common home, the Earth. In turn, an ecologically-sensitive CEL can help us provide the vision to consistently live out our duty and vocation “to be protectors of God’s handiwork”⁶—both human and non-human.

Situating the Dissertation in Current Theological Ethical Thought

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (GE) Francis laments that some hold a harmful ideological error that maintains that the only important thing that counts is the one particular ethical issue or cause that they are defending (GE, 101). Francis likewise decries the inconsistency of caring for human life while not caring for our common home and *vice versa* (LS, 91).

These inconsistent attitudes towards human life and what affects and threatens it are not new; they have existed since Bernardin’s time. This is why he called for a CEL that sought to weed out contradictory moral positions concerning human life. What is new today is the *context* in which human life is threatened by the destruction of our common home. If we are to be concerned about and to care for human life, caring for our common home is something that can no longer be neglected today. The new context would shape the content of what standing for human life and what a consistent ethic of life means today.

This new context is where this dissertation is situated. Specifically, since greater attention is being paid to the ethical implications of caring for our common home and since integral ecology is an emerging theme, the dissertation aims to help in the understanding of how caring for our common home and integral ecology reframe what it means to undertake the Christian duty of respecting, protecting, and promoting human life especially as the Church

⁵As revealed by Bernardin’s former assistant, Fr Alphone Spilly, CPPS to Dawn M. Nothwehr in an e-mail. For more details see Nothwehr, “From Ontology, Ecology, and Normativity to Mutuality,” in *Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing its Reception and Relevance*: footnote 12.

⁶Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 207. Abbreviated as *LS*. Unless otherwise stated, all Church documents are sourced from the Vatican’s online archive at www.vatican.va

forcefully maintains the link between life ethics and social ethics (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 15). In this regard, the dissertation also aims to bridge the division and inconsistencies held by people who focus on only one or the other.

Finally, this dissertation also seeks to help those involved both in pro-life ministries and advocacies for the care of our common home to broaden their moral visions and horizons in order to see how these two are inseparably linked. In this context, the dissertation's aim is also to address the problems of a misguided anthropocentrism that values only human beings and is unconcerned for the rest of creation (LS, 68–69) and “biocentric” tendencies that sees the human person as only one being among others, neglects interpersonal relations, and overlooks care for other human beings (LS, 118).

Development of the Argument

The dissertation first undertakes a historical and theological analysis of the CEL to determine its strengths and weaknesses. Its strength lies in its potential to be a corrective moral vision to broaden the limits of what we see as morally significant, to bridge the gap between inconsistent moral positions concerning human life, and to help us break open from the frugal ways we reduce the meaning of the sanctity of human life and human dignity into one or several issues.⁷ Its weaknesses lie in the inconsistent approaches to private morality (bioethics and sexual ethics) and public morality (social ethics) that it adopts from the Church's magisterium⁸ as well as its insistence on the foundational character of a specific principle (“no direct taking of innocent human life”) and its consequent hasty and faulty application across different life issues.⁹ Hence, a return to the more basic principles of human dignity and the sanctity of human life—or better, a constellation and congruence of different principles rather than only one—is suggested.¹⁰ Likewise, it would behoove the

⁷Walter, “What Does Horizon Analysis Bring to the Consistent Ethic of Life?,” 11–15. See also Ronald P. Hamel, “The Consistent Ethic of Life: A Corrective Moral Vision for Health Care,” in *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing Its Reception and Relevance*, 16–32 and Thomas A. Nairn, OFM, “The Consistent Ethic of Life as Moral Analogy,” in *The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing Its Reception and Relevance*, 35–47.

⁸Timothy A. Byrnes' article provides an excellent background of this criticism. See “How ‘Seamless’ a Garment? The Catholic Bishops and the Politics of Abortion,” *Journal of Church and State* 33 (Winter 1991) 17–33.

⁹Richard A. McCormick, SJ, “The Consistent Ethic of Life: Is There an Historical Soft Underbelly?,” in *Consistent Ethic of Life*, ed. Thomas G. Fuechtmann, London: Sheed & Ward, 1988, 109–119.

¹⁰Franz Jozef van Beeck, SJ, “Response: Weaknesses in the Consistent Ethic of Life? Some Systematic-Theological Observations,” in *Consistent Ethic of Life*, 130.

consistent ethic of life to first advance virtues and practices that will incline people to such an ethic before leaping into principles and policies.¹¹ Lastly, admitting that context shapes the content of a CEL, it is argued that it must pay attention to the new ways in which life is threatened so as to stay germane—this includes the modern ecological crisis.

A similar historical and theological examination of integral ecology then follows. Francis' call for an integral ecology has been examined as a set of beliefs about the world and the human person, a way of seeing things, and a principle that guides our action.¹² Francis' vision shows continuity from Catholic social teaching on our common home as well as progression. From being uncritically anthropocentric and strongly contrasting human and natural ecology, Francis reflects more a nuanced anthropocentrism by insisting the intrinsic value of God's creation and bridging the gap between human and natural ecologies.¹³ In doing so, he neither denies the special value and dignity of human beings nor does he deny the usefulness of creation to human beings. On the other hand, it also shows a progression and expansion of Catholic social teaching on our common home. Indeed, it is in its ability to synthesize and develop what has been previously laid down in Church teaching in order to see the larger picture that the strength of integral ecology lies.¹⁴

It is noteworthy that some obstacles and criticisms faced by integral ecology and the consistent ethic of life are akin. Foremost of these is that in both cases there is a penchant to belittle other issues affecting human life, such as the destruction of our common home, compared to abortion on the part of those who see abortion as the paramount pro-life issue and *vice versa*.

¹¹James F. Keenan, SJ, "Virtues, Principles, and a Consistent Ethic of Life," in *The Consistent Ethic of Life*, 53–54.

¹²Vincent J. Miller, "Integral Ecology: Francis's Spiritual and Moral Vision of Interconnectedness," in *The Theological and Ecological Vision of Laudato Si': Everything is Connected*, ed. Vincent J. Miller, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 12–21. Miller's triple characterization of integral ecology served as the framework in this historical and theological analysis.

¹³For articles that explore the continuity and progression of integral ecology in terms of Catholic teaching on the environment, see Anthony Annett, "The Next Step: How *Laudato Si'* Extends Catholic Social Teaching," *Commonweal*, 7 July 2015, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/next-step> (accessed 12 July 2020) and Kevin Clarke, "Pope Francis explores key Catholic Social Teaching themes in 'Laudato Si'," *America*, 18 June 2015, <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/laudato-si-joins-tradition-catholic-social-teaching> (accessed 12 July 2020).

¹⁴Lorna Gold, "The Disruptive Power of *Laudato Si'*—A 'Dangerous Book,'" in *Laudato Si': An Irish Response*, ed. Sean McDonagh, Dublin: Veritas, 2017, 94–95.

Drawing from these two analyses and using a dialogical approach, the final part of the dissertation reframes the CEL. First, it identifies reasons why the CEL must pay attention to the modern ecological crisis: it harms and destroys both human and non-human creation;¹⁵ it disproportionately harms the poor; and it embodies an interventionist mentality that has something to do with the way we use technology.

Second, it establishes why dialogue between the CEL and integral ecology is possible: there are similarities between Bernardin's and Francis' pastoral style;¹⁶ there are similarities between the two visions such as their comprehensive outlooks; and integral ecology itself links human ecology with natural ecology (see LS, 120 and 155).

Third, still following a dialogical approach, the contributions of the CEL and integral ecology to each other are then pointed out. In this part, however, the focus would be on the latter's contribution to the former: integral ecology can further broaden the CEL's moral horizons; integral ecology can provide the CEL with a stronger language of connections as it seeks to find and convey linkages between different issues affecting human life; and integral ecology can open up new pathways for the CEL to consider such as the linkage between poverty and vulnerability.

All these considered, what a reframed CEL looks like is, then, shown. Its foundations would be: an ecologically-sensitive understanding of human dignity, in which the kinship model of creation¹⁷ would be particularly helpful; and an expanded notion of the principle of the sanctity of human life that takes into account integral ecology's theological anthropology of the human person being in relationship with God, with neighbour, and with entire creation (LS, 66).

Built upon these foundations are five principles drawn from Catholic social teaching that will be especially important for a reframed CEL, namely: stewardship and care for creation,

¹⁵Particularly helpful to understand this is Rob Nixon's idea of "slow violence." For more details, see *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism for the Poor*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2011, 2.

¹⁶Kevin J.V. Mannara, CSB, "Bernardin and Bergoglio: What the Cardinal's Legacy Offers to a Church Led by Pope Francis," *New Theology Review* 28, 2 (March 2016) 39-46.

¹⁷Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993, 30, and Daniel P. Horan, OFM, "Haecceitas, Theological Aesthetics, and the Kinship of Creation: John Duns Scotus as a Resource for Environmental Ethics," *Heythrop Journal* 59, 6 (November 2018) 1068.

preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable, a “thicker” notion of solidarity that includes non-human creation, the common good, and equality.

Implications of the Study

Having reframed the CEL, how can it help us to live our Christian duty and vocation to be “protectors of God’s handiwork”? First, we can learn from the CEL’s and Bernardin’s rhetorical style which seeks to find common ground as we work with others; second, this reframed vision can provide the framework that answers Francis’ appeal for consistently living out integral ecology in all its dimensions; and third, it can do this specifically by providing a moral vision that enables us to see the inseparability of care for our common home with the systemic defence of human life. A reframed CEL can help us achieve a “moral and spiritual wholeness” that embraces all of God’s creation and help us see that love is “not a rare fluid to be economized” but is a “capacity that grows by use.”¹⁸

Similar to the original CEL and integral ecology, a reframed CEL would also face significant obstacles and would have limitations, the most significant ones being: an anthropocentric interpretation which could use a reframed CEL to justify that non-human creation exists for human beings; and a “logic of the line” approach which argues that we must attend to *all* human needs first before turning our attention to non-human creation.¹⁹

These two were then embodied in a concrete tension that a reframed CEL has to face, that is, the tension between the need to protect our common home and the need to address legitimate human needs such as livelihood, especially of the poor and the vulnerable. A specific case that exemplifies this tension is then evaluated from the lens of a reframed CEL: the community-based whale shark ecotourism in Oslob, Cebu, the Philippines.²⁰

¹⁸Mary Midgley, *Animals and Why They Matter*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983, 119.

¹⁹Robert N. Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge our Moral Universe*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003, 11–14. See also 201–3.

²⁰For an overview of this case, see Cris Evert B. Lato, “Whale Shark Watching Goes to Oslob,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 24 February 2012, https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/151397/whale-shark-watching-goes-to-oslob?utm_expnid=.XqNwTug2W6nwDVUSgFJXed.1 (accessed 12 July 2020) and Physalus Institute, *Whale Sharks of Oslob: A Report on the Status of the Whale Shark Watching Tourist Industry in Tan-Awan*,

The case study shows that in practice, a reframed CEL must perform a careful balancing act between competing yet valid needs. Following Keenan's suggestion to cultivate virtues that will help us develop attitudes to be inclined to the CEL, the study also proposes virtues that may help us as we live a reframed CEL, especially in achieving such a balance: mercy, vigilance, solidarity, humility, courage, and most importantly, prudence.²¹

In addition, the study is also contextualized by exploring how a reframed CEL can be lived out in the Filipino milieu. Attitudes and values that are important for the Filipino culture would help in living out this ethic: *pakikisama* (seeking harmony with others), *pakikipagkapwa-tao* (regard for others), *pakikiramay* (the ability to empathize with others), and *bayanihan* (the practice of mutual assistance in times of distress).²²

Bernardin recognized and insisted that the systematic nature of Catholic theology means that there must be a constant process of testing the use of principles in one case by its use in very different cases. Acknowledging the prefatory nature of his moral vision, Bernardin was not hesitant to submit his consistent ethic of life to scrutiny and for application to different cases, particularly right to life and quality of life issues.²³ Following this line of reasoning, the dissertation concluded by encouraging its readers to continuously test and apply this reframed CEL across diverse cases, particularly in exploring the relationship between caring for our common home and "traditional" human life issues. Doing so would help refine the foundations and principles behind this reframed ethic, which, in turn, would help us expand our moral universe and see that to consistently protect human life we must also care for our common home.

Oslob, Cebu, 3, <http://www.moalboal.net/moalboal/images/pdf/oslob-physalus-report.pdf> (accessed 12 July 2020).

²¹Keenan, SJ, "Virtues, Principles, and a Consistent Ethic of Life," 53-54.

²²For more details about these Filipino cultural values, see Patricia B. Licuanan, "A Moral Recovery Program: Building a People—Building a Nation," in *Values in Philippine Culture and Education*, vol. 1, *Philippine Philosophical Studies*, edited by Manuel B. Dy, Jr., Washington, D.C.: Office of Research Publications and the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994, 31-32, and Angeles Tan Alora and Josephine M. Lumitao, "An Introduction to an Authentically Non-Western Bioethics," in *Beyond a Western Bioethics: Voices from the Developing World*, edited by Angeles Tan Alora and Josephine M. Lumitao, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001, 11-12.

²³Bernardin, "The Church's Witness to Life," Seattle University, 2 March 1986, in *The Seamless Garment*, 103.