Landas 35:1 (2023) 69–93

FOUNDATIONS AND PRINCIPLES OF A REFRAMED CONSISTENT ETHIC OF LIFE

Anatoly Angelo R. Aseneta

Abstract. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's Consistent Ethic of Life (CEL) is a moral vision that can be used to uphold consistently the value and dignity of human life in all its stages and circumstances. However, it must be reframed to acknowledge the new ways in which life is threatened today; these include the modern ecological crisis of our common home. This essay seeks to paint a more concrete picture of a reframed CEL. The first part rebuilds the original foundations of Bernardin's moral vision in light of the crisis of our common home. The second part identifies and reframes principles from Catholic social teaching that can guide us in living out this ethic. The essay concludes by pointing out how this reframing does not undermine the original CEL. Rather, such a reframing enhances its foundations, principles, and substance.

Keywords. Consistent Ethic of Life; *Laudato Si'*; Joseph Cardinal Bernardin; ecological ethics; pro-life

As the United States presidential elections drew near, some members of the U.S. Church raised once again the matter of single-issue voting. In focusing on abortion as a preeminent, nay, decisive issue for many U.S. Catholics, the full range of issues that affect human life and dignity, especially of the poor and the vulnerable, is not given significant attention; among these are systemic racism, genocide, the coronavirus pandemic, and the crisis of our common home.[1]

This scenario brings to mind Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's moral vision of a consistent ethic of life (CEL). More than thirty years ago, Bernardin gave his Gannon Lecture at Fordham University entitled "A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue." In it, he sought to link together different issues about human life, particularly the right to life and quality of life. More specifically, the Cardinal sought to rule out contradictory moral positions concerning the unique value of human life, "from the womb to the tomb."[2] Bernardin's moral vision from more than three years ago still remains to be significant today.

According to two articles written by Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, Texas and William O'Neill, S.J. of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, the exploitation of the environment is one issue that has been sacrificed in favor of single-issue voting strategy to end abortion.[3] O'Neill contends that the modern ecological crisis—alongside endemic poverty and neglect of those gravely affected by

[1]M. Seitz, "Bishop Seitz: Single-issue voting has corrupted Christian political witness," *America* (September 30, 2020); W. O'Neill, "What vote will best protect the sanctity of life? Prudence must decide," *America* (September 30, 2020).

[2]J. Bernardin, "A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue" (Gannon Lecture, Fordham University, December 6, 1983), in T. Nairn, ed., *The Seamless Garment: Writings on the Consistent Ethic of Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 10–13. Hereafter referred to as *SG* with appropriate page numbers. The title of the specific address given by Bernardin, together with its nature, occasion, and place and date it was given, will be provided, if available, the first time it is cited.

[3]Seitz, "Bishop Seitz: Single-issue voting has corrupted Christian political witness"; O'Neill, "What vote will best protect the sanctity of life?"

the coronavirus pandemic—is gravely wrong. To say that abortion is an "intrinsic evil" and, therefore, must be "preeminent" should not stop the conversation.[4]

Elsewhere, it has been argued that Bernardin's CEL must be reframed and expanded in the light of the crisis of our common home and with the help of integral ecology. The destructive effects of this crisis on the integrity of both human and non-human life and its profoundly moral dimensions in terms of justice and equality are just some of the reasons identified as to why the CEL should pay attention to the modern ecological crisis.[5] After humanity has survived the pandemic and returned to "normal," is it also back to "normal" for how we treat our common home? Having survived the pandemic, can future generations survive on this "sick planet"?[6] An ecologically-sensitive CEL can serve as a moral compass to help us consistently live out our duty to protect and promote life in light of this destructive crisis. A reframed CEL can provide the moral vision and framework for articulating in a coherent manner the linkages between different ethical issues concerning the defense and promotion of human life in all its stages as well as of our common home on which life itself depends.[7]

While the reasons for having an ecologically-sensitive CEL have been determined together with its contributions, what it would look like, particularly in terms of its foundations and principles, has not yet been laid down. This essay, therefore, seeks to paint a more concrete picture of such a reframed ethic. The first part of this essay rebuilds

---

[4]O'Neill, "What vote will best protect the sanctity of life?" Regarding the controversial concept of "intrinsic evil," see N. Polgar & J. Selling, eds., *The Concept of Intrinsic Evil and Catholic Theological Ethics* (Lexington Books/Fortress Academics, 2019).

[5]A. Aseneta, "The Consistent Ethic of Life of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and the Crisis of Our Common Home," *Landas* 33:1 (2019): 43–54.

[6]The thought behind putting humans on a sick planet comes from B. Swimme & T. Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 257.

[7]Aseneta, "The Consistent Ethic of Life of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and the Crisis of Our Common Home," 60–62.

the original foundations of Bernardin's moral vision in light of an ecologically-sensitive CEL. The second part identifies and reframes principles from Catholic social teaching that can guide us in living out this ethic. The essay concludes by pointing out how this reframing does not undermine the original CEL. Rather, such a reframing enhances its foundations, principles, and substance.

Foundations

Bernardin grounds the CEL on the unique value and dignity of the human person and the systemic defense of human life in all stages and in all circumstances. Similarly, a reframed CEL must remain built on the same foundation.[8] However, human dignity and the value of human life as well as the unique place of the human person must be understood in a larger context. As Francis pointed out in his call for an integral ecology, human beings are not the only inhabitants of our common home. The theological anthropology behind integral ecology maintains that human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely entwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the rest of creation.[9] Thus, while it is clear that human beings occupy a special place in our common home, it is also equally clear that there is no room either for a "tyrannical anthropocentrism" that is nonchalant of other creatures or for an indifference towards one's neighbors (LS no. 68).[10] Human dignity—a central tenet of Catholic moral theology and social ethics—is not necessarily a stumbling block

[8]See J. Bernardin, "The Church's Witness to Life" (Seattle University, March 2, 1986), in SG, 103 and J. Bernardin, "The Death Penalty: An International Human Rights Issue" (General Annual Meeting of Amnesty International, Loyola University Chicago, June 23, 1984), in SG, 27.

[9]Francis, *Laudato Si'* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 66. Hereafter referred to as LS.

[10]Francis, "Homily at the Island of Lampedusa" (March 19, 2013), in G. Vigini, ed., *Care for Creation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 53–54.

to the care for our common home.[11] While it can be observed that the Catholic tradition's overemphasis on human dignity has obscured the connection between that dignity and the integrity of non-human creation,[12] an ecologically-sensitive human dignity can serve as a fruitful norm in caring for God's creation.[13] The same can be said about anthropocentrism. Even in his call for an integral ecology, Francis does not totally reject anthropocentrism; instead, what he rejects is an excessive, misguided, and tyrannical one (LS nos. 68, 116, and 118–119). Indeed, an appreciation of our unique place in our common home is necessary if we are to take care of it. Occupying such a special place entails a serious duty to carry out a responsible stewardship over our common home, to care for it, and to cultivate it.[14]

Given the fundamental place of human dignity in the Catholic tradition as well as the CEL, a reframed consistent ethic must affirm this foundation. However, human dignity must be reinterpreted in the light of our complex relationships and responsibilities in our common home. In seeking to reinterpret human dignity in this manner, the kinship model of creation is an important resource. In *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, Denis Edwards writes about how scientific data

---

[11]In his work, D. Cowdin considers the problematic relationship between contemporary moral theology's emphasis on human dignity and sound ecological ethics. For more details, see D. Cowdin, "Toward an Environmental Ethic," in K. Irwin & E. Pellegrino, eds., *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 112–147.

[12]R. Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads: Towards an Ecological Theology of Liberation in the Philippine Context* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 107–108.

[13]In *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), D. Hollenbach, S.J. proposes an ecologically sensitive anthropocentrism and Christian humanism. For a summary, see D. Cowdin, "Environmental Ethics," *Theological Studies* 69:1 (February 2008): 166–168.

[14]Benedict XVI, "If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation" (2010 Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), nos. 2, 6, and 7.

reveals that human beings are born from the Big Bang, are made from stardust, and are part of an evolutionary history of life. Human beings share a common history of life with all of Earth's creatures. Indeed, we are emergent creatures who share the same hydrogen atoms that materialized in the early life of the universe 14 billion years ago.[15]

From this scientific perspective which theology cannot ignore, we can glimpse a close interrelationship between human beings and the universe, including its galaxies, stars, and non-human creation. In short, human beings are in kinship with all other creatures. The kinship model "sees [the] human being and the earth with all its creatures intrinsically related as companions in a community of life."[16]

This is not to deny the special place of human beings as being created in the image and likeness of God. Edwards argues that being made in God's image and likeness means that human beings are made for interpersonal love in the midst of and in relation to the rest of God's creation. Our precise vocation is to relate to other creatures as God does—not in sentimental, anthropomorphic, and instrumental ways but in ways that respect the specificity, distinctiveness, integrity, and proper autonomy of each creature as they are. More to the point, human beings are called to act responsibly before God within creation, to "cultivate and care for" what God has created.[17]

The strength of this kinship model of creation is that it helps us transcend the separation and hierarchy that tend to obscure the relationship between humans and the rest of creation. This model helps us break away radically from the more rigidly-demarcated distinctions

[15]D. Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 8–14.

[16]E. Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 30. M. Himes and K. Himes advance a *companionship* model that corresponds with this kinship model. For more details, see their *Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 109–112.

[17]Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 14–18.

between human and non-human creatures.[18] In the words of one of the model's proponents, E. Johnson, "this kinship attitude does not measure differences on a scale of higher or lower ontological dignity but appreciates them as integral elements in the robust thriving of the whole."[19]

A serious engagement with ecological realities—in particular, an attentiveness to the connectedness of everything, our kinship with the entire cosmos that runs in our very bodies, and a painful awareness of the crisis of our common home—will not just supplement but also reconfigure our very understanding of human dignity. In the words of C. Hinze: "Regarded through an ecologically attentive lens, theological anthropology, pertaining as it does to [the] religious understanding of our human creaturehood, confirms the profundity of the commerce of humans with nature, whose impact reaches down into our very embodiedness [sic]."[20]

Such an expanded notion of human dignity is implicit in Bernardin's CEL and other works.[21] D. Nothwehr indicates that the Cardinal shows a relational ontology that opens up the CEL to ecological questions.[22] Created in God's image and likeness, human life is both sacred and social. Our relationship is not only with God but also

[18]D. Horan, "*Haecceitas*, Theological Aesthetics, and the Kinship of Creation: John Duns Scotus as a Resource for Environmental Ethics," *Heythrop Journal* 59:6 (November 2018): 1068.

[19]Johnson, *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit*, 30.

[20]C. Hinze, "Catholic Social Teaching and Ecological Ethics," in D. Christiansen & W. Grazer, eds., *And God Saw that It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996), 170. The whole paragraph has its source from pp. 168–171 of the same work.

[21]See J. Bernardin, "Theology on Tap," in *Selected Works of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin* Vol. 1: *Homilies and Teaching Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 590–592 and "Religion Enrichment Day," 422–425.

[22]D. Nothwehr, "From Ontology, Ecology, and Normativity to Mutuality: The Attitude and Principle Grounding the Consistent Ethic of Life," in T. Nairn, ed.,

with our neighbors. In turn, our relationship with other humans of inviolable dignity means that we must protect and nurture each other both personally and socially through the structures we create. Different morally significant issues that affect life, which include care for our common home, arise precisely within this highly complex and interconnected life.

Finally, it is possible not only to broaden our notion of human dignity but also to develop our notion of the sanctity of human life which is another principal tenet of the CEL and the Catholic tradition. In his investigation of the principle of the sanctity of human life, Keenan points out that "sanctity of life" is a rather new expression as it has not appeared in Catholic encyclopedias and dictionaries. At its inception, "sanctity of life" is a euphemism for God's dominion. Life is sacred not necessarily because it has intrinsic value but more so because it is a divine possession. However, John Paul II, particularly in his moral argumentation in *Evangelium Vitae*, breathes new life into this principle. God's dominion is put in the context of creation (the human person as being created in God's image and likeness) and leaves us to consider the human person as "having *in se* the dignity to claim inviolability." There is thus a development of the understanding of the sanctity of human life from the human person and life as simply objects which God owns to being subjects that bear the divine imprint.[23] Taking into account this development of the principle of the sanctity of human life, it is arguably feasible to broaden it further in light of integral ecology's theological anthropology. Such an expansion of the understanding of human dignity and the sanctity of human life has far-reaching consequences. One of these is that a reframed CEL will not only rely on a single principle to advance the connection between life issues, which now include protecting God's creation. Rather, it has

The Consistent Ethic of Life: Assessing Its Reception and Relevance (New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 132–135.

[23]J. Keenan, "The Moral Argumentation of *Evangelium Vitae*," in K. Wildes & A. Mitchell, eds., *Choosing Life: A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 48–55.

to rely on the convergence of several principles to identify and advance the connection between life issues.

Principles

F. van Beeck, S.J. asserts that the CEL should not rely on the "massive fixity of explicit principle." Instead, what the ethic seeks to do can be achieved by conveying convergence. This is best done not by insisting on one absolute principle but through the use of several convergent formulae or principles. Precisely because of their convergence, such formulae can point to a total commitment that lies at the heart of the CEL without expressing it in one standard formula.[24]

Apart from human dignity and the sanctity of human life which remain to be paramount, several principles—drawn from Catholic social teaching—stand out as significant for a CEL that is attuned to the crisis of our common home and informed by an integral ecology. These are: stewardship and care for creation, the preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable, a "thicker" notion of solidarity, the common good, and equality. After briefly defining these principles and pinpointing their key characteristics, we will proceed to identify why they are important for a reframed CEL.

Stewardship and care for creation

If human life is fundamentally grounded in its relationship with the earth itself, then one of the obvious principles for a reframed CEL is stewardship and care for creation. While it is a latecomer, it remains to be a key principle or major lesson of the Church's social teaching[25] as demonstrated by a review of Catholic social teaching

[24]J. Van Beeck, "Response: Weaknesses in the Consistent Ethic of Life? Some Systematic-Theological Observations," in T. Fuechtmann, ed., *Consistent Ethic of Life* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1988), 130.

[25]E. DeBerri & J. Hug, with P. Henriot & M. Schultheis, *Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret*, 4th rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 33–34.

on the environment.[26] The Church has a well-documented tradition of stewardship and care for creation even if it has not always been primarily because of creation's intrinsic value. With *Laudato Si'* and Francis's call for an integral ecology, it becomes apparent that being a steward of God's creation means caring for and cultivating creation not just for human ends but because it has value in itself.

Becoming increasingly and painfully aware of how the modern ecological crisis affects both our common home and human life, we are called to become more responsible and consistent stewards of God. To care for our common home means caring for our neighbor, especially the most vulnerable ones; it is not simply tending the garden of the world (cf. Genesis 2:15). Similarly, to care for our neighbor, we must also look after our common home—indeed, our only home. While stewardship and care for creation helps a reframed CEL see that we have a serious responsibility for our common home, this reframed ethic expands this principle by including concern for our neighbor as an indispensable component. Consistency means we cannot have it both ways.

An ecologically-attuned common good

The common good "embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby [women and men] are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection."[27] In the words of the U.S. bishops, it refers to the "social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential and to realize their human dignity."[28] Included

[26]See, for instance, Raluto, *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroads*, 92–100 and 107–109. See also D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, rev. and exp. ed. (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 369.

[27]John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1961), no. 65.

[28]W. Byron, "Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching," in P. Giordano, ed., *Readings for Theology 141: A Theology of the Catholic Social Vision* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Loyola Schools Office of Research and

in these social conditions are respect for the human person, the social well-being and development of the community, and maintenance of peace and security by the authorities.[29] However, what exactly comprises the common good is always to be a subject for discussion.[30] Even the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* acknowledges the time-specific character of the common good: "the demands of the common good are dependent on the social conditions of each historical period.…"[31]

Even though the exact contents of the common good depend on different historical social conditions, it is "strictly connected to respect for and integral promotion of the person and [his or her] fundamental rights" (CSDC no. 166). Thus, it includes human rights which should always be in the context of the promotion of the common good.[32]

Everyone has a right and duty to participate, according to one's capacity, in the promotion, development, attainment, and enjoyment of the common good (CSDC no. 167). The common good is not simply the sum total of individual goods; it belongs to everyone and is indivisible, hence it is called "common" (CSDC no. 167). This stands in contrast to and serves as a challenge against individualistic attitudes as the Church stresses everyone's participation in the common good.[33]

The common good, then, is not merely a social concern but is fundamentally about the very dignity and lives of persons. This is why the Church insists that everyone should have access to the common

---

Publications, 2007), 242, citing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education*, 25.

[29]Byron, "Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching," 242.

[30]Byron, "Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching," 243.

[31]Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006), no. 166. Henceforth CSDC.

[32]DeBerri et. al., *Catholic Social Teaching*, 23.

[33]DeBerri et. al., *Catholic Social Teaching*, 23.

good; without access to it, persons are deprived of something essential for dignified living and for reaching their full human potential. Given the close connection between human health and the health of our common home, we are becoming increasingly aware that the common good includes the environment in which we live in. It is clearly one of those conditions of social living that are necessary for us to reach our full potential and to realize our dignity. M. Himes and K. Himes make the same point when they sought to expand the common good to include the protection of the relationship between human and non-human creation in the context of companionship. Tracing how Catholic social thought elaborated the components of the common good through the language of human rights, Himes and Himes note how the "right to a safe environment" has developed to be part of the common good. It is one of those essential needs, basic freedoms, and relationships that serve human dignity.[34] As B. Swimme and T. Berry point out: "We cannot have well humans on a sick planet."[35]

The health of our common home is not only indispensable for human dignity and potential; it is also necessary for the social well-being and development of the community as well as for the attainment of a just social order. As we have seen, the crisis of our common home disproportionately and unjustly affects the poor and the vulnerable more. This is why Francis maintains that solidarity and the preferential option for the poorest are imperative for the attainment of the common good (LS no. 158). Protecting the poorest and preventing irreversible damage to our common home includes protecting the so-called "global commons" of the planet, namely, the atmosphere, the forests, the global water cycle, and the oceans, among others.[36] The Pope in particular states that "the climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant

[34]Himes & Himes, *Fullness of Faith*, 116–117.

[35]Swimme & Berry, *The Universe Story*, 257.

[36]O. Edenhofer & C. Flachsland, "*Laudato Si'*: Concern for Our Global Commons," in V. Miller, ed., *The Theological and Ecological Vision of* Laudato Si': *Everything is Connected* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 177 and 180–181. See also O. Edenhofer, C. Flachsland, and B. Knopf, "Science and Religion in Dialogue Over the Global Commons," *Nature Climate Change* 5 (2015): 907–909.

for all" (LS no. 23). Taking into consideration integral ecology's central vision that everything is connected and reading that statement in the context of the whole encyclical, it can be surmised that it is not just the climate that belongs to all and is meant for all but also the entirety of our common home.

The CEL calls us to expand our moral concern to include the protection and enhancement of the dignity of human life in society. The ethic calls us to a so-called "justice challenge" that confronts us with questions on how to build a society that provides the essential moral and material support for every human being to realize his or her dignity. This justice challenge is thus intimately related to access to and participation in the common good. Bernardin identified racism, homelessness, unemployment, poverty, and access to health care as some pressing justice challenges.[37]

On account of these, two things must be noted. First, the CEL is already evidently aware of the importance of the common good. While the abovementioned issues remain to be important justice challenges, a CEL that is informed by both the crisis of our common home and integral ecology must also recognize that pursuing the common good includes protecting our common home. The modern ecological crisis is not just an environmental crisis but is also a justice challenge because it is closely related to the protection and enhancement of human dignity, especially of the poorest.

Second, as the principle of the common good underscores everyone's access to and responsibility in attaining social conditions for dignified living, it must be given significant emphasis if we are to create a societal climate of consistent respect for human life at every stage and in every circumstance. While the principles of human dignity

[37]J. Bernardin, "The Consistent Ethic of Life and Public Policy" (U.S. Catholic Conference Social Action Directors' Conference, Washington, DC, February 10, 1988), in SG, 148–149. For poverty, see J. Bernardin, "The Fact of Poverty Today" (Catholic University of America, January 17, 1985), in SG, 60–69. For the consistent ethic of life and health care, see J. Bernardin, "The Consistent Ethic of Life and Health Care Systems" (Foster McGaw Triennial Conference), in SG, 82–83.

and sanctity of human life signify the sacred character of human life, the principle of the common good stands for its sociality.

Preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable

The Latin American bishops have a particular role in the emergence of the principle of the preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable. Though the term itself was not yet used in the Medellín Conference of 1968, the concept was already present when the Latin American bishops committed themselves to be in solidarity with the poor and give preference to the poorest and most needy sectors of society. This concept was affirmed in the 1979 Puebla Conference and the term was used in one chapter of the Final Document of Puebla. The chapter was entitled "A Preferential Option for the Poor."[38]

The preferential option for the poor constitutes a form of partiality[39] which instructs us to put the needs of the poor and the vulnerable first.[40] It is a commitment to being in solidarity with the poor. Such an option means giving special care for people or groups who are marginalized.[41] Instead of being morally pernicious, this partiality is morally justified and even required.[42] The common good requires the good of the whole of society. If the good of all is to prevail, then

---

[38]D. Dorr, "Poor, Preferential Option For," in J. Dwyer, ed., *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 756.

[39]S. Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor," *Theological Studies* 54:2 (1993): 242.

[40]United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions—Reflections of the U.S. Catholic Bishops* (June 19, 1998), available at http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions.cfm (accessed October 12, 2020).

[41]D. Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth: Catholic Social Teaching* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2013), 8–13.

[42]Pope, "Proper and Improper Partiality," 242.

preferential protection must be given to those who are negatively affected by their lack of power and the presence of deprivation.[43] The poor have a special place with God not because they belong to a specific class nor because of their virtue or moral merit but because of their need.[44]

Poverty is complex and multifaceted; the poor include not only those who are economically deprived but also those politically, culturally, ecologically, and religiously deprived. Furthermore, it includes those who are discriminated against because of their gender, race, or other grounds.[45] The Biblical understanding of the "poor" includes not only those who are in financial poverty but also all those who are marginalized and despised. The poor, then, are people who are not considered and respected as persons: they are the "insignificant ones," the "non-persons" who are not recognized in their full human dignity.[46] Thus, we say preferential option for the poor and the *vulnerable*.

The link between poverty and human life can be seen through the negation of the latter, namely, death. G. Gutiérrez holds that "poverty means death, both physical death that is early and unjust, due to lack of the most basic necessities for life, and cultural death, as expressed in oppression and discrimination for reasons of race, culture, or gender."[47] Moreover, theologically speaking, poverty means the negation of creation's significance for it is against the will of God the Creator of life. To speak theologically of poverty is not to deny its economic and social aspects but to grasp its "cruel and deep meaning:

---

[43]Byron, "Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching," 241.

[44]C. Astorga, *Catholic Moral Theology and Social Ethics: A New Method* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2014), 163.

[45]Dorr, "Poor, Preferential Option For," 757.

[46]G. Gutiérrez, "Memory and Prophecy," in D. Groody, ed., *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 26.

[47]Gutiérrez, "Memory and Prophecy," 27.

its radical rejection of life, the gift of God, as this life is manifested in the narrative of creation."[48]

The preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable is indispensable for an integral ecology. If the CEL is to be truly informed by integral ecology and is to be truly attentive to the crisis of our common home, it has to pay attention to this option. Innocent or not, the poor and the vulnerable not only bear the greater burden of the effects of the crisis of our common home; they are also more susceptible when it comes to threats against life. Where poverty kills, the principle of the preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable serves as a more apparent principle that connects life issues.

Of course, this does not mean that we should care about the life of the poor and the marginalized only. The option for the poor is a preferential and not an exclusive one. Consistency means defending human life where it is threatened, regardless of whether it is the life of the poor or the rich, the innocent or not.[49] However, the principle of the preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable can, arguably, help us go beyond the innocent versus non-innocent human life distinction that the principle prohibiting the direct taking of innocent

[48]Gutiérrez, "Memory and Prophecy," 28.

[49]To give an example, euthanasia appears to be a problem that primarily affects the wealthy who have access to costly medical and pharmaceutical resources or who have the wherewithal to travel to countries such as Switzerland where euthanasia is legal. For more details about the connection between euthanasia and the wealthy, see the following: T. Bancroft-Hinchey, "Euthanasia—Luxury for the Wealthy," *PravdaReport* (August 18, 2012), available at http://www.pravdareport.com/society/121910-euthanasia_rich/ (accessed October 12, 2020); C. Fotinopoulos, "Dignity in Death Shouldn't Just Be for the Rich," *ABC News* (July 9, 2014), available at https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-07-09/fotinopoulis-dignity-in-death-shouldnt-just-be-for-the-rich/5582238 (accessed October 12, 2020); and J. Mudditt, "Voluntary Euthanasia May Only Be for the Wealthy, Canadian Expert Warns," *The New Daily* (November 14, 2017), available at https://thenewdaily.com.au/life/wellbeing/2017/11/14/euthanasia-taxpayer-subsidised/ (accessed October 12, 2020). The authors provide statistical data as well as the costs of euthanasia.

human life invites.[50] It can do so by focusing our attention on how poverty threatens life more often than do categories of innocence or non-innocence.

Finally, this option does not mean absolving the poor and the marginalized from their responsibilities, particularly towards our common home. It must not be forgotten that the poor also contribute to our common home's degradation, even if not to the same extent as the well-off.[51] Moreover, even while the poor still use crude methods in their everyday lives (e.g., traditional biomass, fuelwood, charcoal, cow dung, and kerosene for heating and cooking) that harm them and our common home, they are often left without a choice if they are to survive.[52]

---

[50]One of the foundational principles of the CEL is the prohibition on the direct taking of innocent human life (see Bernardin, "A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American Catholic Dialogue," 12). Some theologians found the CEL's insistence on this principle being foundational and preeminent to be problematic. For a detailed critique, see R. McCormick, "The Consistent Ethic of Life: Is There an Historical Soft Underbelly?," in Fuechtmann, ed., *Consistent Ethic of Life*, 109–119. See also C. Kaveny, "An Ethic of 'Life,' Not 'Purity,'" *Commonweal* (November 24, 2013) and Van Beeck, "Response: Weaknesses in the Consistent Ethic of Life? Some Systematic-Theological Observations," 123–139.

[51]Perhaps an exception would be actions by the poor that massively damage our common home. An example would be informal settlers or "squatters" dumping wastes into lakes, rivers, and other bodies of water as in the case of Manila Bay and Laguna de Bay in the Philippines. For details about the effects of informal settlers disposing of wastes into waterways, particularly in the Philippines, see the following: J. Arranza, "What Happened to the Anti-Squatting Laws?," *Philippine Institute for Development Studies* (June 22, 2017), available at https://pids.gov.ph/pids-in-the-news/2007 (accessed October 12, 2020); United Nations Environment Programme, "Battling pollution in the Philippines' largest lake," available at https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/battling-pollution-philippines-largest-lake (accessed October 12, 2020); and M. Cinco, "Pollution, squatting, industries hasten death of Laguna de Bay," *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (January 5, 2017), available at https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/859365/pollution-squatting-industries-hasten-death-of-laguna-de-bay (accessed October 12, 2020).

[52]United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2011* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 51; United Nations Environment

Thus, even Francis recognizes that there must be "common but differentiated responsibilities" for our common home (LS nos. 52 and 160).[53]

A "THICKER" NOTION OF SOLIDARITY

Closely linked with the principle of the preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable is the principle of solidarity. It is possible to have a preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable because of our solidarity with them. This solidarity comes from an experience of significant sharing, to an extent, in the life of the poor and the vulnerable.[54] Solidarity involves a *moral empathy of each person towards everyone*, particularly of the advantaged and privileged ones towards the disadvantaged and underprivileged ones.[55]

Solidarity is both a moral principle and a social virtue. As a moral principle, it determines the order of institutions in which "structures of sin" must be purified and transformed through the creation or proper

---

Programme, *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication* (Nairobi, Kenya: UNEP, 2011), 12; and Worldwatch Institute, "The State of Consumption" (October 24, 2016), available at http://www.worldwatch.org/node/810 (accessed October 12, 2020).

[53]J. Kureethadam provides a useful discussion of historical and personal responsibilities concerning the crisis of our common home, particularly climate change. Such a discussion is helpful in identifying common but differentiated responsibilities, especially in terms of adaptation and mitigation. He concludes that the rich and developed countries that benefited from heavy industrialization have a greater responsibility. Moreover, they owe poorer nations a debt since the latter have been deprived of the carbon space they need for development. For more details, see *Creation in Crisis: Science, Ethics, Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 266–272.

[54]Dorr, "Poor, Preferential Option For," 757.

[55]D. Finn, "Commentary on *Centesimus Annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*)," in K. Himes, L. Cahill, C. Curran, D. Hollenbach, & T. Shannon, eds., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 449.

modification of laws, market regulations, and structures. It rises to the level of a social virtue because it places itself in the realm of justice. It is a virtue "directed *par excellence* to the *common good*" since it finds itself in a commitment to the good of one's neighbor with the preparedness to "lose oneself" for others instead of exploiting them, and to serve others instead of oppressing them (CSDC no. 193).

More than just an attitude and "a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far," solidarity is action-oriented. It involves "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."[56]

Solidarity is indispensable for a reframed CEL because its absence is an obstacle to living out this ethic. A lack of solidarity may be in the form of indifference or in the form of overvaluing independence.[57] Without solidarity, we will not be able to receive and accept freely other people and concerns in our lives. Instead, we will be confined to our own circles of people and affairs.

For a CEL that is ecologically attuned and informed by an integral ecology, solidarity cannot be limited to the present generation and to human beings. It must adopt a "thicker" notion of solidarity which is present in Francis's call for an integral ecology. Authors like A. Annett,[58] K. Clarke,[59] V. Miller,[60]

---

[56]John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), no. 38.

[57]McCormick, "The Consistent Ethic of Life: Is There an Historical Soft Underbelly?," 106–107.

[58]A. Annett, "The Next Step: How *Laudato Si'* Extends Catholic Social Teaching," *Commonweal* (November 7, 2018).

[59]K. Clarke, "Pope Francis explores key Catholic Social Teaching themes in 'Laudato Si'," *America* (June 18, 2015).

[60]V. Miller, "Integral Ecology: Francis's Spiritual and Moral Vision of Interconnectedness," in Miller, ed., *The Theological and Ecological Vision of* Laudato Si', 19.

and K. Irwin[61] note that in *Laudato Si'*, Francis calls for a broader idea of solidarity that extends to future generations (intergenerational solidarity) and to the rest of creation. For instance, at the beginning of the encyclical, Francis insists that "we require a new and universal solidarity" in light of the crisis of our common home (LS no. 14). Elsewhere in the document, Francis talks about a "sense of solidarity which is at the same time aware that we live in a common home which God has entrusted to us" (LS no. 232). The interconnectedness of everything also invites us "to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity" (LS no. 240). Finally, calling for a "universal communion," Francis maintains that if our hearts are truly open to such a communion, this sense of fraternity will exclude nothing and no one. The way we treat God's creation is deeply connected to the way we treat our fellow human beings (LS no. 92).

Thus, apart from extending solidarity to future generations, Francis also extends the principle to promote a planetary solidarity with the earth, its inhabitants, and the whole of creation. From a mere social interdependence with other human beings, we are called to move towards an acknowledgement of human interdependence with the rest of creation.[62] If a reframed CEL is to be authentically seamless in its recognition of connections, particularly between caring for our common home and protecting human life, it must also have a broader sense of solidarity. However, this solidarity would also mean that we should care for God's creation because of its intrinsic goodness and not just because of its instrumental value for humans.

While a reframed CEL is called to a thicker notion of solidarity, this does not mean putting human beings and creation on the same level. It must be clarified that the way we should show solidarity with our neighbors must be different from the way we extend such solidarity

[61]K. Irwin, *A Commentary on* Laudato Si': *Examining the Background, Contributions, Implementation, and Future of Pope Francis's Encyclical* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2016), 152–153.

[62]Miller, "Integral Ecology," 19.

to other creatures and the rest of creation. Even Francis is clear that we should not fall into a biocentrism that prescinds from humanity. Yielding to biocentrism will only add another imbalance which will not solve present problems while adding new ones (LS no. 118).

Equality

Since every human person is created in God's image and likeness, everyone possesses the same dignity and is fundamentally equal with each other, regardless of race, gender, nationality, origin, culture, or class (CSDC no. 144). While differences in talents are a part of the divine design, discrimination in fundamental rights is not compatible with God's plan.[63] Safeguarding and promoting this equality is a communal responsibility through the mutual actions of individuals and peoples genuinely concerned for the good of all. Finally, to stimulate the common and personal growth of everyone, it is necessary to help the least, thereby "effectively ensuring conditions of equal opportunity for men and women and guaranteeing an objective equality between the different social classes before the law" (CSDC no. 145).

Taking into account the glaring ecological divide between the poor and the rich brought about by poverty and the modern ecological crisis,[64] the principle of equality is vital for a reframed CEL. Similar to the previously mentioned principles, equality also serves to unite different but related life and justice challenges because these issues urge us to look at how inequality threatens life in various stages and circumstances. Whether it is the life of the unborn in the womb, the inmates who cannot get good legal services, the sick and the elderly swayed towards assisted suicide, and the poor who cannot fully access and participate in the common good in different ways, they are all not treated as having dignity and worth equal to those who are affluent or

[63]Byron, "Ten Building Blocks of Catholic Social Teaching," 242, citing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education*, 23–24.

[64]For a discussion of this ecological divide in terms of the carbon footprint produced by the rich and the poor, see Kureethadam, *Creation in Crisis*, 261–266.

able. An ecologically-sensitive CEL informed by an integral ecology is compelled to foster personal and social attitudes and actions that guarantee conditions of equal opportunity, especially for the poorest.

Conclusion

Reframing Bernardin's CEL also means reexamining the foundations and principles behind it. The Catholic moral and social tradition's emphasis on human dignity and the sanctity of human life is not and should not be a stumbling block to our vocation as protectors of God's creation. For that to happen, however, these two principles—which also serve as foundational for Bernardin's CEL—must be understood in the context of our relationship not only with each other and with God but also with the rest of our common home. A result of expanding our understanding of human dignity and of the sanctity of human life is that a reframed CEL will no longer rely on these two principles as its foundation. Instead, an ecologically-sensitive CEL will have to rely on a network of several principles to identify and advance the connection between life issues which now include the modern ecological crisis.

In addition to the principles of human dignity and the sanctity of human life, the five principles or major themes of the Church's social teachings mentioned in the second section stand as some of the more significant principles for a CEL informed by the crisis of our common home and integral ecology. Aside from the individual significance of each principle, their congruence as well as the broader vision of integral ecology function to underscore better the systematic and analogical character of Catholic moral theology that Bernardin claims to be at the theological foundation or the substance of the CEL.[65] A brief word about these two characteristics and how they are better reflected by the congruence of these principles serves as an apt conclusion to this essay.

---

[65]Bernardin, "The Church's Witness to Life," in SG, 103. See also J. Bernardin, "Address to the Consistent Ethic of Life Conference" (Portland, Oregon, October 4, 1986), in SG, 120.

The systematic nature of Catholic moral theology means that it is rooted in an array of foundational principles and then formulated in such a way that draws out the meaning of each principle and the connections among them at the same time. Since it is systematic in nature, Catholic moral theology refuses to take up moral issues in an ad hoc manner; there is a constant process of testing the utility of a principle in one case by its use in very different cases. Bernardin points out that the CEL only seeks to show how this testing takes place in dealing with issues involving the taking of life and the enhancement of life. However, he did not elaborate what this means precisely.

Being analogical in reasoning, Catholic moral theology identifies unifying elements that link together different issues while concurrently recognizing their distinctiveness. Consequently, issues should not be reduced to a single problem despite their similarities. The analogical character of Catholic moral theology addresses a host of issues that are dissimilar but have shared features. For example, the element of protection of human life unifies a spectrum of life issues from abortion to war to euthanasia. At the same time, there are other elements that radically differentiate these issues from one another. The CEL seeks to stress that amid these distinctions stands a common moral challenge: the protection of human life.

The systematic and analogical character of the CEL is alternatively expressed by Bernardin in terms of its scope and structure. With regards to its scope, the CEL, like the systematic character of Catholic moral theology, is broad enough to embrace different moral issues concerning human life. Concerning its structure, the CEL, following the analogical character of Catholic moral theology, bases its broad moral concern on a solid moral analysis that recognizes both the correspondences and divergences among distinct cases. Moreover, it admits that at some point a higher priority may be given to one issue over others.[66]

[66]J. Bernardin, "An Update on the Consistent Ethic of Life" (North American College, Rome, January 23, 1991), in SG, 202.

By relying on the convergence of these principles instead of depending on only one, the CEL reflects to a greater degree the systematic nature of Catholic moral theology which is founded on an array of principles. Furthermore, while each of these principles has their own meaning, we have seen that they are also connected at the same time. The convergence of these principles also prevents the ethic from treating issues in an ad hoc fashion because they show that apart from the principles of human dignity and the sanctity of human life, these different life and justice challenges are intimately connected in various ways.

The coherence of these principles also underlines the analogical reasoning claimed by the CEL. While human dignity and the sanctity of human life unify a spectrum of life and justice issues, these principles not only do the same but also highlight the distinctive character of each challenge. The preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable, for instance, can highlight significant aspects of some threats against life that go beyond categories of innocence, as in the cases mentioned earlier (that is, abortion, capital punishment, and the modern ecological crisis).

Reframing Bernardin's CEL in the light of the crisis of our common home and with the help of integral ecology also means restructuring its rather anthropocentric foundations and principles. Contrary to a "logic of the line" approach that pits the needs of humans and non-human creation against each other, these reframed foundations and principles help us achieve a "moral and spiritual wholeness"[67] that

[67]A "logic of the line" approach sees a long line of concerns starting with human needs and with care for the environment towards the end of the line. Human needs should be met first before turning to our physical environment. Additionally, attending to the needs and the interests of the latter is argued to lessen the attention that is due to humans. R. Wennberg finds this approach to be illogical since if one were to follow this reasoning, we would never be able to give attention to the welfare of our physical environment due to the sheer magnitude of human needs to be fulfilled. For him, caring for our environment does not (and should not) necessarily mean lessening attention to humans. Instead of having this flawed perspective, Wennberg points out that we must

"excludes nothing and no one" (LS no. 92). Instead of undermining the foundational principles of human dignity and the sanctity of human life, a reframed CEL enriches these by placing them in the larger context of our relationship with God, with one another, and with the rest of creation. In addition, these foundational principles are further augmented by the convergence of other principles from Catholic social teaching: stewardship and care for creation, a preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable, a "thicker" notion of solidarity, the common good, and equality.

Through the coherence of these principles, the systematic and analogical character of Catholic theology that Bernardin claims to be the theological foundation or substance of the CEL is better reflected. Finally, a reframed CEL, remaining true to Bernardin's vision that the distinctive characteristics of each moral challenge must be recognized, must see through this coherence that caring for God's creation is done not only for protecting and promoting conditions for dignified living. Rather, it is done also because God's creation possesses an intrinsic value.

About the Author. Anatoly Angelo R. Aseneta, Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the Department of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University where he teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in moral theology. He obtained his Ph.D. in Theology from the Ateneo de Manila in 2019. His research interests include Joseph Cardinal Bernardin's consistent ethic of life, fundamental moral theology, and sexual ethics.

---

have "moral and spiritual wholeness" that embraces concern for humans and the environment. For more details, see R. Wennberg, *God, Humans, and Animals: An Invitation to Enlarge our Moral Universe* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 11–14, also 201–203.