

THEOCENTRISM AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY: ADDRESSING ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS THROUGH INTEGRAL ECOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF CREATION

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This study contributes to humanity's search for solutions to mitigate the worsening environmental conditions. We argue that a theocentric paradigm, which integrates ecocentrism and human responsibility in the relationship between humans and non-human creatures, will mitigate the current ecological problems. This article aims to integrate Pope Francis' integral ecology and Thomas Aquinas' theology of creation to provide a conceptual framework for reimagining human-nature relations in the context of the current environmental crisis. A theocentric paradigm of the relationship between human and non-human creatures corrects the anthropocentric model, which exploits the environment and other non-human creatures. Thus, we need a new approach to reimagining human-nature relations that balances the extreme view of anthropocentrism and improves environmental conditions. Thomas Aquinas' theology of creation underlines that all creatures manifest the continuing presence of God and that humans are responsible to God for how they treat other creatures. Pope Francis' integral ecology underscores the inherent value of non-human creatures and criticizes humanity's lifestyles that exploit the environment. Therefore, a theocentric paradigm invites human beings to become stewards of non-human creatures based on God's original design and intention.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Creation, Ecocentrism, Integral Ecology, Stewardship, Theocentrism

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In 2015, Pope Francis joined the clarion call toward radical movements in addressing the worsening condition of our environment. In his encyclical, *Laudato Si* (LS), he states, “The earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that the once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish” (Pope Francis, 2015, para. 21). Eight years after the promulgation of LS, Pope Francis reiterated the same predicament in his remark in *Laudate Deum* (LD), this time issuing a distress signal, so to say, “The world in which we live is collapsing and may be nearing the breaking point” (Pope Francis, 2023, para. 2). Implicitly, the urgent call to transform our relationship with the environment remains largely unanswered, even as the planet’s condition continues to decline as a consequence of human ways. It cannot be overstated that, despite the signs of the times, we have yet to make far-reaching changes in our worldviews and actions.

Various scientific studies have confirmed Pope Francis’ observations about the worsening condition of the Earth, both in global and local contexts. For instance, the United Nations (UN) reports state that the “rising temperatures are fueling environmental degradation, natural disasters, extreme weather, food and water insecurity, economic disruption, conflict, and terrorism” (The Climate Crisis, para. 2). In the Philippines, the IBON¹ foundation (2020) declares that “the environment is in a critical state, degraded hugely by destructive and extractive profit-motivated activities of foreign and local corporations, oligarchs, politicians, officials, and certain individuals” (para. 3). In summary, the environmental crisis is a global problem with catastrophic consequences that

are most severely felt in underdeveloped and developing nations. It is worrisome that we are still far from achieving our goal of mitigating the ecological crisis we are currently experiencing. We should already be moving with purpose and urgency to address the root causes of these problems and find solutions. For instance, Jung Wk Kim’s (2006) study affirms what many say: we are marching toward our demise because of the harm we inflict on our environment, including industrialization, deforestation, mining, illegal logging, and the destruction of the marine environment. Mattia Zulianello and Diego Ceccobelli (2020) highlight even more dangerous and often unaddressed factors that exacerbate our destructive ways, including a lack of ecological awareness and education among many people. All these factors contributing to ecological crises trace back to humanity’s tendency to neglect its duty to preserve and protect God’s creation.

The plunderous ways of human beings toward their environment are ascribed to an anthropocentric model of human-nature relations, which “has caused untold harm, as human beings misunderstand their unique status within the created order and appeal to it as justification for exploitative relationships with the earth’s resources” (Schlesinger, 2018, p. 343). This anthropocentric model justifies the exploitation and domination of human beings over the environment (Dube, 2015). In this case, anthropocentrism has become an extreme view in understanding human-nature relations, significantly contributing to the loss of biodiversity and species. Humans have become the worst enemies of the environment. On the other hand, ecocentrism, as expressed by the Bishops during their Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazon in October 2019, calls for balancing human-nature relations: “Ecological conservationism that cares about the biome but

¹ IBON is a non-profit institution based in the Philippines that focuses on research, education, and information development. The term IBON derives from the Filipino word for bird.



ignores the Amazon people”(para.45).Zulianello and Ceccobelli (2020) state that ecocentrism “does not attribute priority to human needs and interests per se; it is, rather, a set of ideas that conceives the relationship between humans, other living species, and the entire ecosystem as holistic and interrelated”(p.625).This perspective asserts that non-human creatures possess inherent worth beyond their utility to humans, with the hope of promoting a more holistic and respectful relationship with the natural world. In short, ecocentrism calls for a paradigm shift that challenges the anthropocentric view that human beings are masters who dominate other creatures. It views humans and other non-human creatures on the same level in the hierarchy of beings (Washington et al., 2022). The earth’s cry urgently demands that humanity reevaluate its relations with nature, cognizant that anthropocentrism threatens to “injure the land and the peoples” (Pan-Amazon Synod, 2019, para. 45).

We argue in this paper that an alternative understanding of human-nature relations, beyond anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, is needed as a third way to reimagine human beings’ unique role as stewards of God’s creation, addressing the worsening environmental conditions. With this leitmotif, we turn to Pope Francis’ integral ecology and Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation. For his part, Pope Francis (2015) discusses integral ecology in LS, stating, “An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyle and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us”(para. 225). Integral ecology is an invitation for human beings to look at their relations with all creations from a holistic perspective. Everything is connected, and the relationships between humans and non-human creatures are inextricably linked.

In support of Pope Francis’ integral ecology, we turn to Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation. Aquinas posits that human and non-human relations must be founded on God’s mind or intention as the creator of everything on the planet. In *Summa Theologiae* (ST), he writes, “It must be said that every being that exists in any way is from God. For whatever is found in anything by participation must be caused in it by that to which it belongs essentially, as iron becomes ignited by fire”(Aquinas, ST I, q. 44, a. 1). Hence, everything exists in participation with God’s existence. For this reason, human beings’ relations with other creatures are governed by their participation in God. Therefore, human relations with nature are not based on personal preferences but are exercised within the limits of their participation in God’s existence.

Considering the foregoing, we aim to answer the main question: How do Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation and Pope Francis’ integral ecology provide a conceptual framework for reimagining human-nature relations in the context of the current environmental crisis? To answer this question, the author discusses the following sub-problems: First, what key insights can be drawn from anthropocentrism and ecocentrism as dominant paradigms in responding to the current environmental crisis? Second, what are the converging and diverging elements in Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation and Pope Francis’ integral ecology that can deepen our understanding of human responsibility in light of this crisis? Third, what alternative paradigm for human-nature relations can be proposed, drawing on Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation and Pope Francis’ integral ecology, to address the shortcomings of anthropocentrism and reinforce ecocentrism?

This research employs thematic analysis, which Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006)



defined as the “method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (p. 77). As an approach, thematic analysis facilitates the discovery of new insights and the understanding of complex issues (Elliot, 2018). Thematic analysis includes the following six-step procedures: “1) Transcription, Familiarization with the Data, and Selection of Quotations; 2) Selection of Keywords; 3) Coding; 4) Theme Development; 5) Conceptualization Through Interpretation of Keywords, Codes, and Themes; 6) Development of Conceptual Model” (Naeem et al., 2023, pp. 5-14). The first five steps (1 to 5) will be employed in the first and second sections of this paper, which embarks on a study of the anthropocentric and ecocentric paradigm, Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation, and Pope Francis’ integral ecology. The sixth step, which involves developing a conceptual model, will be utilized in the third section to construct a conceptual model for reimagining human-nature relations within the context of current environmental crises.

INSIGHTS AND LIMITATIONS OF ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND ECOCENTRISM IN ADDRESSING THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

THE ANTHROPOCENTRIC PARADIGM

The Dual Forms of Anthropocentrism that Cause Environmental Exploitation. Experts underscore two forms of anthropocentrism contributing to humanity’s exploitative relations with the environment. Reynaldo Raluto’s (2015) diagnosis attributes Western-influenced anthropocentrism as the primary cause of humanity’s abuse and misuse of natural resources. This form of anthropocentrism prioritizes values, behaviors, attitudes, and practices that give humans absolute control and power over non-

human creatures. The other form was spawned by modernity, which justifies the sovereignty humans accord to themselves as the subject or measure of everything that surrounds them (Horan, 2019). This form is anchored in the modern philosophical view that valorizes the rational power of humans to rule over non-rational creatures on the planet. Hence, from this anthropocentric perspective, humans control and rule non-rational creatures.

The Misinterpretation of Dominion and Its Consequences.

The staunch critics of this anthropocentric paradigm grossly point to the misappropriation of the terms “dominion” and “subdue” as prerogatives accorded by God to humans in the Biblical story of Creation (Gen. 1:28; see Deckers, 2004). Accordingly, because of this misguided and self-serving misinterpretation, justification has been given to humans to become masters and exploiters of the environment, the upshot of which is environmental degradation and its catastrophic side effects. As masters, humans wield absolute power to decide over their environment. Moreover, those who follow an anthropocentric paradigm argue that humans are not part of nature because they are considered superior to it. In their view, humans should not worry about the environmental impacts of their actions (Sivinski & Joseph Ulatowski, 2019). In this form of anthropocentrism, humans have become insensitive to the worsening conditions of the earth, justifying their inability to change their harmful lifestyles that continue to exacerbate the earth’s condition (Ilia Delio et al., 2008). Humans refuse to take responsibility for the deteriorating environment, treating it as an isolated entity to which they owe no obligations.

The Diminution of Non-Human Creatures’ Intrinsic Value. Anthropocentrism posits that non-human creatures do not have intrinsic



value. The value of non-human creatures is only instrumental, i.e., their worth depends on how much they cater to the needs of humans (Owe et al., 2022). In short, humans assign value to non-human creatures based on the benefits and advantages they derive from them. Overall, anthropocentrism is a perspective that places human beings at the center of God's creation, prioritizing the interests of humans over those of non-human creatures (Korolev, 2014). Anthropocentrism views human-nature relations from the human perspective, rather than from a divine one. From this perspective, the basis of value and the purpose of everything exist in the minds of human beings, rather than in God's mind. In an anthropocentric view of nature, God has no role in shaping human-nature relations. The idea of God is irrelevant in human-nature relations.

THE ECOCENTRIC WORLDVIEW

Ignoring Human Agency. An alternative view of human-nature relations is ecocentrism. Ecocentrism does not prioritize human beings but attempts to view human-nature relations holistically (Zulianello & Ceccobelli, 2020). In this worldview, humans are not considered separate from nature but are integral to it; they are not external beings who view nature from a distance. In an ecocentric paradigm, humans and nature are intrinsically interconnected. Ecocentrism believes that non-human creatures have intrinsic value (Cocks & Simpson, 2015). Nature's value does not depend on what humans can get from it or whether it serves their needs. Because humans are not the basis for valuing nature, it must be respected and valued for its own sake, not for humans' sake (Kopnina, 2016). Therefore, the value of nature transcends humans' interests and needs.

Ecocentrism posits that humans are an integral part of nature. Humans survive because of nature

(Douglas, 2017). This is a counterargument to the anthropocentric view that humans occupy a central place in the rest of creation. Ecocentrism views humans as part of nature. Humans are not central figures in nature but rather part of it, like the other creatures on Earth. Ecocentrism rejects the notion that humans have a unique role in contributing to nature's survival. "On this view, man is not separate or superior to nature but takes his place in nature's system" (Hoffman & Sandelands, 2005, p. 144). The existence of humans is integral to their natural environment. Humans are interwoven with the rest of the creatures. Humans have no authority to alter the order of creation. Ecocentrism eliminates the notion of human beings as superior to other creatures in creation (Simkins, 2014).

Disengaging Human Interests from Environmental Action. The primary function of ecocentrism is to prohibit or mitigate, at the very least, the impact of human activities on the environment. For ecocentrism, all forms of life depend on their existence in nature. For this reason, ecocentrism is a response to the imminent threat posed by humans to preserve other forms of life that inhabit the natural world. Ecocentrism aims to end human activities that harm other life forms in the environment, claiming that the "world would be better off without us" (Salazar & Alper, 2002, p. 545). For ecocentrism, humans are considered the cause of ecological disorder that disrupts the lives of other species in nature. Nature can maintain its beauty and grandeur without human intervention.



AQUINAS' THEOLOGY AND POPE FRANCIS' INTEGRAL ECOLOGY: TALKING POINTS

THOMAS AQUINAS' THEOLOGY OF CREATION CREATIO EX NIHILO

Thomas Aquinas' theology of creation posits that God is the cause of everything in this world. God is the origin and source of everything we see on the planet. Hence, God is referred to as the first efficient cause (Xin, 2024). Human beings and other creatures do not produce their own existence; rather, God is the ultimate origin of their existence. Furthermore, in Thomas Aquinas' theology of creation, God is not only viewed as the efficient cause; He is also believed to be the unmoved mover (Brock, 2012). Mariusz Tabaczek (2022) explains that for Thomas Aquinas, creation has "two principal and intrinsically related aspects: creation understood as an active divine agency on the part of God and creation understood as the passive reception of divine agency on the part of creatures" (p. 52). When God created the world, he made it out of nothing, i.e., *ex nihilo*, which means that God does not need pre-existing materials to create (Baldner, 2024). Therefore, creation is considered the proper act of God since nobody except God can create something out of nothing. The idea of God's creative agency in nature means that God is the ultimate source and origin of everything in it.

HUMAN AGENCY AS PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S AGENCY

All things on earth, including human beings, move according to the movements inscribed in them by God. Hence, we can claim that humans and nature must act and move according to the intention of God because God is the uncaused cause and the unmoved mover of everything that exists on earth. In human-nature relations, Thomas Aquinas' theology of creation teaches us

to respect the natural order and movements of everything on this planet. The end and purpose of nature do not exist in the minds of human beings but in God's mind as the uncaused cause and unmoved mover. In this regard, God's purpose and intention, written in the very nature of things, must govern human and non-human relations. It means that humans do not create the purpose of other non-human creatures to serve their needs but merely discover and respect them according to God's plan.

Thomas Aquinas believes that everything in this world exists in participation with God's existence. In short, for things to exist properly, they must participate in the existence of God. Thomas Aquinas states, "All beings apart from God are not their own being but are beings by participation" (*Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 44). All things, including humans, exist because of God. Hence, creation has no existence apart from God, the origin of all things. The existence of all things on earth is not self-existing but always in participation with God. As human beings, we understand our existence within the limits of our participation in God's existence. Our relationship with other creatures, such as plants and animals, is exercised in participation with God's existence (Awad, 2012). Our existence carries a responsibility to regulate it based on our participation with God. Our existence does not mean "establishing [our] own patterns of self-understanding and meaning apart from God" (Lynch, 2024, p. 3). Our existence is always God-centered, not human-centered. Therefore, we can never claim or boast that our existence and activities are autonomous in an absolute sense and self-directed.

CREATION AS THE CONTINUING PRESENCE OF GOD

Creation is a medium that reminds us of the continuing presence of God on earth. The created



things, such as plants, animals, and humans, bear something about their Creator. All creatures on earth reflect a likeness of God in varying and limited degrees according to their nature and substance, although no creature on earth resembles the perfect image of God. Thomas Aquinas states that “things are like to God first and most commonly because they exist” (ST I, Q. 93, A. 2). The existence of the things we see around us points us to God, their creator. Since God is the creator of all things that exist on earth, we can know Him through His creation, which, in a tiny fraction, reflects the infinite perfection of God (Yordy, 2010). All creatures, in one way or another, reveal something about God. Knowing creation is knowing God, who leaves a mark on every creature on earth. In the context of the current ecological issues, Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation compels us to treat all creatures not based on what they can provide but on how they can lead us closer to God, who reveals Himself in creation.

THE DISTINCTION OF HUMAN BEINGS AS IMAGO DEI

Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation includes a discussion of the unique role of human beings in God’s creation. Although Thomas Aquinas recognizes that everything bears a likeness of God, following the Sacred Scriptures, he maintains that, strictly speaking, only humans carry the distinction of being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). Thomas Aquinas declares this, stating that “intellectual creatures alone, properly speaking, are made to God’s image” (ST I, Q. 93, A. 2). In all of God’s creation here on earth, only human beings are endowed by God with a rational nature distinguishing them from plants and animals. Here, Thomas Aquinas echoes Augustine’s idea that the intellectual nature of human beings is the reason for their having a distinctive role and responsibility in the order of temporal creation (ST 1, Q. 93,

A. 2). Therefore, human beings have a higher responsibility than plants and animals because of their intellectual souls, which give them the power to think and understand (ST I, Q.79, A.1). They must exercise their unique role as responsible stewards of the environment.

UNDERSTANDING DOMINION AS STEWARDSHIP

Steven Long (2012) claims that human beings endowed with reason are “best equipped to undertake a reasonable stewardship and dominion over the lower creation that gives glory to God and solace to man” (p. 212). In short, Thomas Aquinas’ emphasis on the distinctive character of human beings does not imply the control and exploitation of the environment. The nobility of human beings in God’s creation underscores that God holds humans responsible for their impact on the environment. According to Thomas Aquinas, God directs human beings to practice responsible stewardship of creation. Hence, to properly understand the unique role of human beings in God’s creation, we must not isolate them from their relationship with God (Hipp, 2012). Thomas Aquinas’ theology of creation highlights the responsibility of human beings toward the environment more than their distinct position in God’s creation. Their rational character does not entitle them to plunder other creatures. According to Steven Long (2012), all creatures deserve honor and respect because they are visible signs of God’s unending presence in the world. Furthermore, Long enumerates three reasons for us to preserve and protect creations: first, the created world is the home of our intellectual life and contemplation; second, creation to some extent reveals God to us; and third, all creation participates in the common good of the entire cosmos. Given this understanding, the roles of human beings with other creatures are understood in the spirit of human beings’ stewardship of God’s creation.



Although other creatures exist to serve the needs and purposes of human beings, it is not a “sanction for arbitrary exploitation” (Hipp, 2012). Human beings’ rational nature should be understood in the sense of responsibility rather than control and abuse. Because of their status as *imago dei*, human beings are duty-bound to preserve and protect God’s creation.

POPE FRANCIS’ INTEGRAL ECOLOGY

THE IMPLICATIONS OF OUR LIFESTYLE ON OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

Pope Francis underscores the need to develop an integral ecology as a perspective and framework for responding to the pressing issues brought about by the present ecological crises. Pope Francis’ (2015) concept of integral ecology highlights the implications of our everyday life on ecology, emphasizing that we can create a critical impact or significant difference through our actions, such as conserving energy and water, reducing, if not avoiding, single-use plastics, and preserving natural resources. Kerber Guillermo (2020) opines that integral ecology is not complete without considering the implications of our activities for the environment. The call to integral ecology urges us to evaluate our current relationship with the environment, bearing in mind that our agency can have a positive or negative impact on it.

Integral Ecology as a Holistic Approach. Christopher Hrynkow (2019) affirms Pope Francis’ belief that ecological problems are social problems. He understands ecological crisis as a problem that affects everyone regardless of gender, race, and religion. Integral ecology stresses the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of ecology and humanity. It is best described in the phrase “cry of the earth,

cry of the poor” that Pope Francis expressed in *Laudato Si* (Pope Francis, 2015). By highlighting the indispensable unity between human beings and the environment, integral ecology calls attention to the fact that the destruction of the environment directly impacts people’s lives. Thus, Pope Francis’ integral ecology teaches us to see environmental and social problems as intertwined with one another.

Integral Ecology Critiques the Techno-Economic Paradigm. Pope Francis openly criticizes the propensity of people to measure things according to their economic value. Integral ecology, following Pope Francis, opposes the techno-economic paradigm that gives rise to people’s negative relationship with nature. In the techno-economic paradigm, things, including people, are measured in terms of their economic value and contribution to technological advancements. It is an economically driven relationship that appraises human beings and the environment based on their monetary value (Schweiker, 2018). Pope Francis (2015) points out that the techno-economic paradigm pushes people to exploit the environment to produce beyond its limits. A techno-economic paradigm motivates people to control and abuse the environment to sustain their desire for technological advancements and economic improvement. William Schweiker (2018) argues that Pope Francis’ integral ecology is “a radical rejection of, and alternative to, the techno-economic paradigm” (p. 488).

A Call to Dialogue through Integral Ecology. Another characteristic of integral ecology is its call for dialogue to solve ecological crises. According to Daniel Castillo, Pope Francis’ integral ecology calls people to engage in dialogical processes to produce comprehensive solutions to our socio-ecological problems. Integral ecology proposes that dialogue among different areas of study is crucial in determining



the best possible solutions to our ecological problems. Gerard Whelan (2018) argues that Pope Francis' integral ecology is "intrinsically a call for interdisciplinary collaboration" (929). The dialogical approach of integral ecology implies seeing the ecological problems from different perspectives and cooperation among different societal sectors. The worsening conditions of the earth can be best mitigated if all sectors of society work together to promote ecological awareness and direct efforts to solve socio-ecological problems, which are intrinsically linked to one another.

Integral ecology promotes the intrinsic value of creation on the planet (Pope Francis, 2015). Recognizing the intrinsic value of all things, integral ecology rejects the anthropocentric view of nature, which leads to consumerism and relativism, because they value non-human creatures based on their usefulness and monetary equivalent. Integral ecology promotes the value of things that transcend their utility, control, and absolute ownership by human beings. According to Denis Edwards (2016b), Pope Francis' explicit regard for the intrinsic value of non-human creatures is founded on three theological reasons: first, nature is a place of encountering God's presence; second, creation is a product of God's love; and third, it speaks of the ultimate end of the universe, which is already attained in the resurrection of Jesus. Integral ecology asserts that human beings do not assign value to non-human creatures. The value of creatures is not found in the minds of humans but in God. This conviction enjoins human beings to care for and protect nature.

A THEOCENTRIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE CARE FOR CREATION

CREATION AS THE MANIFESTATION OF GOD'S ONGOING PRESENCE

In Thomas Aquinas's concept of creation *ex nihilo*, we locate our solid basis for a theocentric framework: the active and all-sustaining presence of God from which all things, especially human beings, actively participate in God's creative and preserving power. This theme underscores the *sanctity of all creation* and the *reverence* that we must render to the natural world. By recognizing God's ongoing presence in creation, human beings are called to a change of heart, from our exploitative throw-away culture to an attitude of worship and awe toward nature as visible and living proof of God's abiding presence in his creation. Rather than treating the environment as a consumable resource, a theocentric paradigm invites us to see the world as a sign and sacrament of God's ongoing revelation and as the active medium through which we can experience the outpouring of God's love for us. In the theocentric paradigm, we are called to treat all creation respectfully, embracing it as the manifestation of God's divine presence and purpose.

HUMAN AGENCY AS CO-CREATORS AND STEWARDS OF GOD'S CREATION

The theocentric paradigm presents with utmost clarity the role of human beings in the care of the earth. The personalistic view of Aquinas underscores humans' rational nature and unassailable responsibility to participate in God's creative work. This emphasis on the role of humans in creation affirms the scriptural mandate to be responsible for creation. Still, we fulfill this responsibility as stewards, guided by divine purpose and in partnership with God's



will. This theme affirms the divinely bestowed responsibility of human beings as *co-creators and stewards* rather than masters over the environment. Here, our understanding of human responsibility is straightened to align with God's will toward creation to foster flourishing, ensuring that creation, i.e., both human and non-human, can fulfill its intended purpose according to God's divine plan. Participation in divine agency is the principle that guides humans in their stewardship. Participation and stewardship remind human beings that God is the owner, and they are entrusted with the task of caring for and cultivating the natural world. Lastly, this theme signifies the burden of discerning God's plan for His creation, and therefore works with God to sustain the ecological balance and promote the well-being of all life forms.

THE INHERENT WORTH OF CREATION AND THE REJECTION OF CONSUMERIST CULTURE

We see Pope Francis's concept of integral ecology concurring with Thomas Aquinas' assertion that creation possesses intrinsic value, not based on human beings' estimation but bestowed by God as proof of His love. Therefore, all creatures, regardless of their utility to human beings, deserve respect because they are mirrors of God's love and creative power. By giving emphasis to the inherent or intrinsic value of creation, a deep-seated conversion is called for: from a consumerist culture to one that affirms the *inherent dignity* of all creatures. This theme arising from the theocentric paradigm is counter-cultural, as it challenges the pervading tendency to treat the natural world as an available resource for human consumption. In the theocentric paradigm, rejecting consumerism becomes a responsibility. It demands from human beings actions that demonstrate ethical consumption,

sustainable ways and means, and a commitment to protecting the natural world from exploitation and degradation.

By viewing care for creation through the lens of Pope Francis' Integral Ecology and Thomas Aquinas' Theology, humans are invited to see God through the surrounding environment. These lenses, unified in the theocentric paradigm, correct our anthropocentric understanding of the place of human beings in creation by promoting a form of humanism that promotes the positive role of human beings as stewards and defenders of the environment (Ndubueze, 2018). From Pope Francis and Thomas Aquinas, we can distinguish that anthropocentrism is a wrong interpretation of anthropology that endangers the harmonious relations between humans and nature. Pope Francis (2015) states in this regard, "An inadequate presentation of Christian anthropology gave rise to a wrong understanding of the relationship between human beings and the world" (para. 116). Integral ecology and Thomistic theology of creation advocate that humans must foster harmony and care for non-human creatures. The harmony between humans and non-human creatures must reflect the communion exemplified by the Blessed Trinity (Edwards, 2016a). For these reasons, integral ecology does not favor the anthropocentric model of human-nature relations. This model of human-nature relations creates disorder in God's original plan for the relationship between humans and the environment. In short, integral ecology highlights humans' responsible relations with the environment according to God's intention.

The anthropocentric model of human-nature relations is problematic because it "reduces the more-than-human world to mere machine-like objects whose only purpose is to serve human needs" (Becker & Schwartz, 2022, p.



59). Anthropocentrism leads to a distortion of human-nature relations, which harms the environment and other non-human creatures. On the other hand, the Church teaches that human beings must be responsible stewards of God's creation since they are endowed with intellect and free will (Pope Francis, 2015, para. 81). Their inviolable nature and role in the order of creation underscore their *mandatum* to participate in God's creative work (Genesis 2:15).

Pope Francis' integral ecology and the Thomistic Theology of Creation correct the anthropocentric model of human-nature relations, which is detrimental to the environment. From Pope Francis and Thomas Aquinas, we can point out that anthropocentrism manifests a wrong interpretation of Christian anthropology, resulting in a more disruptive relationship between humans and nature (Pope Francis, 2025). An anthropocentric view of the environment gives rise to exploitation and abuse of nature and non-human creatures. Integral ecology calls us to rethink and reject this distorted view of the environment, as it gives us an erroneous perception of humans' distinctive role in relation to other creatures. Instead, integral ecology promotes universal communion between humans and the rest of creation. Thus, integral ecology applies the term "communion," which refers not only to the relationship between humans and God (Grey, 2020). This principle of universal communion commands human beings to interpret their relations with other creatures in the context of their relationship with God. Integral ecology asserts that humans must show love and respect for other creatures. Humans' communion with other creatures impels humans to protect and preserve the rest of creation.

This study concludes that the theocentric paradigm corrects the anthropocentric model

of human-nature relations by anchoring our relationship with other creatures on God's original intention for all creatures. Thus, we recommend that religious organizations, such as the Catholic Church, should take an active role in planning and implementing environmental projects in the community to ensure an integral approach to evaluating the impacts of these projects on people. In addition, the active involvement of the church in environmental projects is grounded in Pope Francis' vision of integral ecology, which promotes an interdisciplinary approach to mitigating the worsening environmental conditions; the role of religion is essential in complementing scientific research on the environment.

Furthermore, Thomas Aquinas' theology of creation and Pope Francis' integral ecology promote stewardship of God's creations rather than plundering and exploiting them for the sake of profit and technological advancements. For this reason, it is recommended that we evaluate the impacts of our lifestyles on the environment. For instance, when purchasing food and gadgets, we can choose environmentally friendly products and support companies that commit to caring for the environment by using recycled materials in their manufacturing processes. We can also integrate environment-friendly practices in our homes, such as segregating our waste, conserving energy and water, and reducing, if not eliminating, the use of single-use plastics and utilizing renewable sources of energy, like solar panels, for our lighting and other needs. In these ways, we can protect and preserve our environment from further damage.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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