

ISIR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISIRJAHSS)
ISSN: 3048-7463 (Online)
Frequency: Bimonthly
Published By ISIR Publisher
Journal Homepage Link- https://isirpublisher.com/index.php/isirjahss

OPEN ACCESS

ISIR PUBLISHER
ESTD: 2024

"Peace with Creation": A Systemic Analysis of John Paul II's Ecological Teaching

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Article History

Received: 15/09/2025
Accepted: 26/10/2025
Published: 28/11/2025

Vol – 2 Issue – 6

PP: -65-70

Abstract

This article presents a systemic analysis of John Paul II's ecological teaching, revealing its internal structure, anthropological foundations, and theological and social consequences. Based on social encyclicals (Redemptor hominis, Laborem exercens, Sollicitudo rei socialis, Centesimus annus), messages of peace (especially the message Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation, 1990) and Wednesday catechesis on creation, the analysis examines the development of the concept of "human ecology", which is key to interpreting the ecological dimension of the Pope's thought. A review of secondary literature (Babiński 2012; Twardowski 2012; Skowroński 2004; Feszczyn 2002; Wołyniec 2017; Mariański 2002) allows us to place the Pope's teaching in the context of Catholic eco-theology and social ethics. The article shows that for John Paul II, the ecological issue is not exclusively environmental in nature, but stems from a moral and anthropological crisis, encompassing both man's relationship with nature and with himself, other people and God. In conclusion, it is pointed out that "peace with creation" is an integral part of Catholic social teaching and, at the same time, the foundation of the Christian response to the contemporary ecological crisis.

Keywords:*John Paul II; Christian ecology; human ecology; theology of creation; Catholic social teaching; ecological crisis; theological anthropology; ecological ethics; eco-theology; peace with creation; moral responsibility; integral ecology; solidarity; common good; moral theology*

INTRODUCTION

The ecological issue is one of the most pressing moral and social problems today, and its significance is widely discussed in both the natural sciences and the humanities. In Christian theology, this issue gained particular importance in the second half of the 20th century, when the progressive degradation of the environment began to be understood not only as a technical and economic crisis, but above all as a crisis of man and his relationship with creation. The teachings of John Paul II, who was the first pope to systematically and consistently incorporate ecological issues into the core of Catholic social teaching, occupy a particularly important place in this reflection. Beginning with the programmatic encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (John Paul II 1979), through *Laborem exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), *Centesimus annus* (1991), to *Evangelium vitae* (1995), the Pope shapes a coherent vision in which concern for creation is rooted in Christian anthropology, and the ecological crisis is interpreted as a manifestation of a deeper moral, cultural and spiritual crisis. The key document remains the 1990 World Day of Peace message *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation*, which is one of the most influential contemporary approaches to ecological theology and, at the same time, a testimony to the connection between ecology and reflection on peace, solidarity and social justice.

Previous research on John Paul II's ecological teaching covers a wide spectrum of approaches – from attempts to systematise its anthropological foundation, through theological and social analyses ( ), to sociological and philosophical approaches. In Polish literature on the subject, the analyses of Jarosław Babiński (2012) occupy an important place. He points out that the papal concept of ecology is inextricably linked to the diagnosis of a global moral crisis, manifested both in man's relationship with nature and with himself. Mirosław Twardowski (2012) emphasises the importance of the concept of "human ecology", understood as a normative structure protecting the integrity of the human person and their social, cultural and environmental roots. According to Antoni Skowroński (2004), the ecological dimension of papal teaching is an organic component of Christian anthropology, and environmental degradation results from anthropology detached from transcendence. Teresa Feszczyn (2002) interprets John Paul II's teaching in the broader context of Polish ecological theology, while Włodzimierz Wołyniec (2017) emphasises the Christological and Trinitarian foundations of human ecology in the Pope's thought. Jan Mariański's (2002) sociological approach shows that the Pope's ecological thought plays a special role in the critique of contemporary consumerist civilisation, understood as a global

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system conducive to the instrumentalisation of the natural world.

The philosophical dimension of the debate is developed in numerous studies by Skowroński (2005; 2006; 2007; 2008), which treat the ecological crisis as a consequence of erroneous anthropological and cultural assumptions, while at the same time pointing to the need to redefine Christian values in an environmental context. More recent works, such as the analysis by Sylwia Sobczuk (2021) and the article by Andrzej Adam (2022), develop the interpretation of ecology from the perspective of the relationship between the human person, peace and the integrity of creation. The study *The Issue of Environmental Protection in the Doctrine of the Catholic Church* (Anon. 2021) places John Paul II's teaching in the broader developmental context of Catholic social teaching on ecology.

International literature has established the view that John Paul II played a key role in shaping contemporary Catholic eco-theology. This is confirmed by the studies *Pope John Paul II and the Environment* (Religious Coalition for Forest Conservation 2003) and *Why the Ecological Crisis Is a Moral Crisis* (RCFC 2003), which point to the papal message of 1990 as the fundamental document of Christian moral ecology. The latest research, represented by Andrzej Adam (2022), emphasises the continuity between the teachings of John Paul II and the integral ecology present in Benedict XVI and Francis, which allows us to view his thought as the foundation of the contemporary development of Catholic ecological reflection.

Despite this rich literature, there is still a lack of studies that would present John Paul II's ecological teaching not in the form of a discussion of selected aspects, but as a systemic whole – covering the relationship between Christian anthropology and the theology of creation, social ethics, ecclesiology and the vision of peace. This gap also applies to a comprehensive analysis of the language and argumentative structures of the Pope's ecological discourse, especially in key documents such as *Redemptor hominis*, *Centesimus annus* and the 1990 message of peace.

The aim of this article is to present a systemic analysis of John Paul II's ecological teaching and to show its integral theological and anthropological structure. The article asks the following questions:

1. How does the Pope interpret the relationship between man and creation in the context of the contemporary ecological crisis?
2. What is the theological and anthropological foundation of 'peace with creation'?
3. How does papal teaching anticipate the development of contemporary Catholic eco-theology and integral ecology?
4. What role does the category of "human ecology" play in his thought?

The main hypothesis of the article is that John Paul II's ecological teaching forms a coherent, systematic doctrine in which Christian anthropology, social ethics and the theology of creation remain inseparable, and "peace with creation" is a consequence of the orderly relationship between man and God and the world.

The work uses a theological-hermeneutical analysis of Magisterium documents, supplemented with elements of theological discourse analysis. I refer to the classical principles of fundamental and systematic theology (Congar, Lonergan, Tracy), which assume that a text should be read in the light of its historical context, theological categories and structure of argumentation. The analysis covers both the content and the linguistic layer, including the use of metaphors, anthropological relational categories, and theological terms that constitute the vision of creation as a gift.

The article consists of three parts. The first discusses the anthropological and theological foundations of ecology according to John Paul II. The second presents an analysis of key papal texts from the perspective of "peace with creation." The third presents the doctrinal consequences of the Pope's ecological thought and its place in the development of contemporary eco-theology.

Anthropological and theological foundations of ecology in the teaching of John Paul II

John Paul II's ecological teaching is not an addition to his theology or an episodic commentary on contemporary problems. On the contrary, it is an organic element of a broad anthropological vision in which the human person is understood as a relational being, oriented towards God and responsible for the world entrusted to him or her. The Pope formulates the foundation of this anthropology in his encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (1979), where he points out that man cannot properly understand himself without reference to God. This basic assumption implies further conclusions about man's relationship to creation: if man exists thanks to a gift, then the natural world also appears as a gift, and not as an object of complete disposal. In this sense, ecology, as understood by the Pope, begins with the Christological truth about man, which conditions all moral and social reflection.

In his encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981), John Paul II develops this intuition by analysing the relationship between work and man's dominion over the created world. This dominion, he emphasises, does not mean absolute power or arbitrary exploitation, but is a form of responsible cooperation between man and God the Creator. This cooperation presupposes respect for the internal laws of nature and concern for its integrity. The Pope consistently emphasises that "work" is not only a productive activity, but also a spiritual and moral dimension in which the dignity of the human person is revealed. Therefore, for him, the degradation of the natural environment is not only an economic issue—it is a form of violation of the moral order, resulting from a reductionist view of man as a consumer and producer.

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In *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987), the Pope introduces for the first time the category of the "structure of sin" in relation to ecological phenomena. He points out that environmental degradation is a consequence of global mechanisms of injustice that distort relationships between people and between nations. In this context, environmental protection becomes not only an ecological issue, but also a moral and political problem. Ecology appears as a dimension of the "option for the poor" because it is the poorest communities that suffer most from environmental devastation. Thus, the papal concept of ecology transcends the technical-pragmatic perspective and is incorporated into the broad panorama of Catholic social teaching, where the central category is the dignity of the human person.

This anthropological vision of ecology takes on its most systematic form in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991), where John Paul II introduces the concept of "human ecology". This is not a concept of ecology in the classical sense, referring to the relationship between organisms and the environment, but a theological-anthropological category expressing the need to respect the natural and moral order inscribed in human nature. Human ecology encompasses both the order of the natural environment and the moral, cultural and social order. The Pope writes explicitly that "the destruction of the natural environment is a consequence of the destruction of moral ecology," because reductionist visions of man—especially those based on consumerism and utilitarianism—lead to the instrumentalisation of the created world. In this way, John Paul II links the ecological problem with the crisis of culture, family, work and social life, revealing its systemic nature.

Finally, in his message for World Peace Day in 1990, *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All Creation*, the Pope presents the most mature synthesis of his ecological reflection. He emphasises that peace is only possible when man finds the right relationship with both God and creation. The foundation of this relationship is the recognition of the world as a gift and of man as a responsible steward who is to safeguard the harmony of creation. John Paul II points out that the ecological crisis has its source in a distorted understanding of freedom, which leads to man's detachment from the objective moral order. Therefore, true ecology cannot be limited to the protection of natural resources, but must include the moral and spiritual renewal of man.

The Wednesday catechesis on creation (1986–1987; 2000) reveals the theological depth of this vision, rooting it in biblical anthropology and the theology of creation. John Paul II interprets man's relationship with the world as participation in God's work, in which every being has its place and dignity. The Pope consistently rejects both extreme anthropocentrism, leading to domination over the world, and ecological biocentrism, which denies the uniqueness of the human person. He points to a third way—the Christian vision of the person as the image of God, called to responsible cooperation with the Creator.

In light of this holistic approach, anthropology and ecology are not two separate areas of reflection in the Pope's thinking, but constitute interpenetrating dimensions of a single vision of man and the world. For John Paul II, nature is not a neutral backdrop for human activity, but a space of relationships in which the truth about the human person is revealed. Therefore, concern for the environment is always concern for the human person, and authentic ecology must be integral ecology—taking into account the spiritual, moral, and social dimensions of human existence.

"Peace with creation": an analysis of key documents by John Paul II

Ecology in the teaching of John Paul II reaches its most mature and systematic form in selected documents in which the Pope combines a theological understanding of creation with a moral and social diagnosis of the present day. While the first chapter presented the anthropological-theological foundation of this vision ( ), this part of the work focuses on the analysis of the most important papal texts: encyclicals, messages and catechesis. Their common feature is a consistent argumentative structure based on the relationship: God – man – creation – community – peace. It is this structure that allows ecology to be interpreted not as a peripheral issue, but as an essential part of moral and social theology.

Although the encyclical *Redemptor hominis* does not contain a developed ecological reflection, it is a key starting point for understanding the entire later doctrine. In it, John Paul II presents man as “the way of the Church,” which consequently means that all relationships—including the relationship with creation—must be interpreted in the light of the mystery of Christ. In this view, environmental degradation is not a purely technical phenomenon, but a symptom of man’s disturbed relationship with God. In the background, there is a theological intuition: if man no longer sees himself as a creature and steward, but as an owner and absolute ruler, then he also "enslaves" creation, which ceases to be perceived as a gift.

The encyclical on human work develops the ecological dimension of papal anthropology through the category of responsible stewardship of the world. John Paul II unequivocally rejects both biocentric concepts that deny the uniqueness of the human person and economic models that exploit nature as a consumable resource. Work—in the theological sense—is an act of co-creation, a form of participation in God's creative work. This gives rise to the obligation to protect the internal laws of nature: its structures, rhythms, and resources. The ecological dimension *of Laborem exercens* manifests itself where the Pope speaks of "moral responsibility" for technology and its impact on the world. Technology is not morally neutral, but is subject to ethical evaluation depending on whether it serves the human person and the common good.

In this document, the Pope systematically introduces ecology into Catholic social teaching for the first time. Environmental pollution is not treated as an incidental consequence of rapid economic development, but as part of a global system of

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injustice that affects the poorest first and foremost. John Paul II speaks of "structures of sin" that include not only economic systems, but also consumerist mentality, utilitarianism and unreflective faith in technological progress. Ecology is incorporated into the ethics of solidarity: care for creation is a duty towards the human community, especially towards "ecologically indebted" nations.

This document marks a turning point. For the first time in the history of the Magisterium, the concept of "human ecology" appears, which will henceforth shape the Church's thinking. John Paul II points out that one cannot speak of ecology without taking into account the moral and social order inherent in human nature. Ecology—both in the physical and anthropological sense—requires respect for the laws of nature. For the Pope, the destruction of the environment is a consequence of the violation of the moral order, which is why "the first environment to be protected is man himself." This diagnosis gives ecology an anthropological and fundamental dimension: it is impossible to restore ecological balance without moral and cultural renewal.

This is a key document, constituting a mature synthesis of the Pope's ecological teaching. Its structure of argumentation is based on three steps:

1. Moral diagnosis: the ecological crisis is a consequence of a crisis of values – a lack of respect for life, resources and human dignity.
2. Theological foundation: creation is a gift that reveals the relational nature of the world and obliges human beings to be responsible.
3. The path to peace**:** peace with creation is an integral part of social peace; peace between nations cannot be achieved while simultaneously destroying the environment.

For the first time, the theology of "ecological sin" is outlined, which consists in the deliberate destruction of the balance of creation.

In his speeches to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences (1984; 1999), the Pope develops the responsibility of science and technology for the future of humanity and the planet. He points out that scientific development must be subordinated to "ecological wisdom," which integrates knowledge and morality.

In his catechesis on creation (1986–1987; 2000), John Paul II reveals the relationship between the order of creation and the order of salvation: the world is a space for the epiphany of God, and its harmony is a revelation of God's wisdom. Anthropology is incorporated here into the theology of creation, leading to the concept of man as God's guardian and co-worker.

The doctrinal consequences of John Paul II's ecological teaching and its significance for contemporary eco-theology

John Paul II's ecological teaching, rooted in theological anthropology and consistently developed in key documents of his pontificate, has shaped a coherent model of thinking that has proved to be one of the Church's most important contributions to the debate on the ecological crisis. His proposal is not merely moralising or social in nature; it is a reflection deeply rooted in Christian doctrine on the relationship between man and the world, on the structure of the gift inscribed in creation, and on the vocation of the human person to responsible cooperation with God. In light of this vision, ecology cannot be understood as a field of technical repair of the world, but as an area in which the fundamental truth about man and his place in the order of creation is revealed.

The central point of the Pope's teaching is the conviction that the ecological crisis is anthropological in nature: it arises from the crisis of man, from a misinterpretation of freedom, work, technology and community. John Paul II repeatedly emphasises that the destruction of the environment is the result of the detachment of human activity from the objective moral order and a consequence of deeply rooted individualism, which severs man's relationship with both God and the natural world. This diagnosis is widely confirmed by philosophical analyses, such as Skowroński's reflection on the anthropological errors of technological civilisation, in which the author shows that environmental degradation is always a reflection of the degradation of the way we understand humanity (Skowroński 2007; 2008). These studies, in line with the Pope's intuition, show that the pursuit of domination over nature stems from a distortion of the concept of freedom and a loss of awareness of the gift that is the foundation of the relationship between creation.

The most original and theologically significant intuition of John Paul II remains the concept of "human ecology" formulated in *Centesimus annus*. In it, the Pope shows the inseparable link between the moral, social and environmental order. Human beings, whose nature and purpose are inscribed in the order of creation, cannot violate this order without destroying the very foundation of their lives. Human ecology therefore means that environmental protection also includes the protection of fundamental social institutions, including the family, and the defence of the of human life at every stage. Theological and philosophical research confirms that the violation of the moral order is directly related to the degradation of the natural environment — this relationship is perfectly illustrated by analyses of Christian values in environmental ethics (Skowroński 2006), which point out that the moral uprooting of man leads to the instrumentalisation of nature.

The inclusion of ecology in Catholic social teaching is another key element of the Pope's teaching. John Paul II redefines classic concepts such as the common good and solidarity, giving them an ecological dimension. The common good encompasses not only the structure of social institutions, but also the quality of the natural environment as a condition for the dignified life of communities. Solidarity, in turn, means responsibility for the heritage of creation, which is incumbent on all nations — especially the poorest ones, which suffer most from environmental degradation. This global approach

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to ecological responsibility is consistent with analyses of the development of historical ecological awareness (Skowroński 2005), which show that environmental issues have long had an international and social dimension.

In his catechesis on creation, John Paul II develops a theological hermeneutics of creation, in which the natural world is presented as a space for the revelation of God's order and wisdom. The Pope emphasises that man, as the image of God, is called to care for the world responsibly, and that this relationship is moral rather than technical in nature. His vision is free from both extreme anthropocentrism and reductionist biocentrism. Human beings retain their unique dignity, but this uniqueness is linked to a special duty, not a privilege of domination. In the light of this hermeneutic, the protection of creation is a form of participation in God's mission and is part of the Christian dynamic of peace, which John Paul II describes as "peace with creation."

Contemporary research on eco-theology confirms that John Paul II's teaching forms the foundation for the theological concept of integral ecology, later developed by Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. As Adam's analyses (2022) show, the concept of human ecology has become a key reference point for *Laudato si'*, and Pope Francis is in fact continuing and deepening John Paul II's insights, placing them in a broad social and global context. Thus, one can speak of a clear line of continuity in which John Paul II is the turning point and foundation of the Church's contemporary ecological thought.

As a result, John Paul II's ecological teaching appears to be one of the most coherent, prophetic and relevant theological proposals concerning the ecological crisis. It combines anthropology, the theology of creation, social ethics and reflection on culture, offering a vision of man and the world rooted in the logic of gift and responsibility. It is a vision that not only interprets the contemporary crisis, but also points the way to moral, spiritual and social renewal, without which it is impossible to restore harmony in man's relationship with the world.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of John Paul II's ecological teaching leads to the conclusion that the Pope created one of the most coherent and comprehensive visions of ecology in contemporary theology. His thought is not limited to fragmentary statements or ad hoc comments on the environmental crisis; on the contrary, it constitutes a well-thought-out and consistent project in which Christian anthropology, social ethics and the theology of creation are combined into an inseparable whole. The foundation of this vision is the truth about man as the image of God, called to responsible cooperation with the Creator. The ecological crisis, in the light of papal teaching, is therefore a consequence of erroneous anthropology: it results from a loss of awareness of the gift, a reductionist understanding of freedom, and the dominance of a consumerist mentality. The response to this crisis cannot therefore be solely technological or economic change, but moral and spiritual renewal that will restore the proper place of both man and the natural world.

Central to the Pope's reflection is the concept of "human ecology," which allows us to grasp the profound relationship between care for creation and care for man and his natural and moral order of life. John Paul II consistently points out that the violation of moral ecology leads to the violation of environmental ecology. In this perspective, the protection of nature is not possible without the protection of man, his dignity, his relationships, and the communal and cultural foundations of his existence. Therefore, the Pope's ecological awareness is integral in nature: it encompasses social and spiritual life, culture and economics, politics and morality. In this view, ecology becomes a space for dialogue between anthropology, ethics, philosophy and the natural sciences, rather than a field of conflict between them.

An important aspect of John Paul II's teaching is also its prophetic dimension. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, the Pope diagnosed processes that only contemporary science, philosophy and public debate are beginning to describe as integral elements of the global ecological crisis. It can be said that his reflection anticipates both the concept of "ecological debt" and the contemporary understanding of integral ecology. Today's discussions on climate justice, global responsibility, human relationality and the ethical consequences of consumerism develop themes that John Paul II formulated long before this vocabulary appeared in scientific debate. This prophetic dimension of his teaching is one of the most important testimonies to its relevance today.

At the same time, the Pope's reflection loses none of its theological depth. John Paul II consistently incorporates the ecological problem into the dynamics of the relationship between creation and salvation. For him, creation is not only the environment in which human beings live, but also a theological space — a revelation of the wisdom, harmony and order inscribed by God in the world. In this light, ecological responsibility becomes a form of participation in Christ's mission and is part of the dynamics of peace, which encompasses both people and all creation. Hence the papal call for "peace with creation," which is not a metaphor but a consequence of the Christian understanding of peace as the fruit of justice and truth.

In light of the above analysis, it can be concluded that John Paul II's ecological teaching sets the direction in which contemporary eco-theology is developing. His main insights—about the anthropological core of the ecological crisis, the moral dimension of technology, human ecology, and the inseparable bond between care for humanity and care for creation—became the foundation for the later reflections of Benedict XVI and the teachings of Pope Francis. In this sense, John Paul II not only initiated a theological debate on ecology, but also gave it a direction, the fruit of which is today's concept of integral ecology.

Ecology, as understood by John Paul II, is therefore not only a response to the environmental crisis, but also a proposal for the spiritual and moral renewal of humanity. It is an ecology of peace and responsibility, an ecological hermeneutics of creation and an anthropological vision of the human person

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who understands himself through his relationship with God, other people and the natural world. In this sense, the papal doctrine is one of the most important and mature approaches to ecology in Christian thought at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries — an approach that remains fully relevant and continues to be a point of reference for contemporary theology, philosophy and social sciences.

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