Philippine Association for the Sociology of Religion Journal
https://pasrjournal.org | eISSN: 2362-9320
Volume 5 Issue No. 2 | doi: https://doi.org/10.63931/39eaan07

Article

Ecological Crisis as a Moral Crisis: A Thomistic Reflection on Environmental Issues

Ted Patrick N. Tuvera
The Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines
Correspondence: tuverated@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay presents a theological reflection that demonstrates how the global ecological crisis is, in fact, a moral crisis in light of St. Thomas Aquinas' theological treatises on the natural moral law and the common good. It will assert two fundamental theological assumptions: (1) that the created world, which God created and through which God makes himself known and can be known, is naturally governed by order to serve the common good for all other creatures, including man, and; (2) that man, as a microcosm, is divinely mandated to care for the planet, and is likewise morally responsible and accountable before God if he fails to true to this fundamental vocation. To demonstrate this, the present work will be divided into three main parts. First, the intersection between theology and ecology should be established, as the planet – our "common home" – serves both a natural and supernatural revelatory function in relation to the will of God. Secondly, it will briefly present pertinent data that describe the planet's current state, as well as the historical development of the crisis in question. This will somehow include the pastoral teachings of the Church regarding the environment and the ecological crisis (i.e., Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical Laudato Si' and the pastoral letters of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines). Thirdly, the principles of Aquinas on the natural moral law and the common good will be presented to demonstrate that this crisis and its causal factors primarily and grossly violate the will of God.

Keywords: *environmental/ecological crisis, Thomism, natural moral law, common good*

Suggested citation:
Tuvera, T.P. (2025). Ecological Crisis as a Moral Crisis: A Thomistic Reflection on Environmental Issues. *Philippine Association for the Sociology of Religion Journal, 5*(2), 131-150. https://doi.org/10.63931/39eaan07

Publisher's Note: IJCHR stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Copyright: © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction

In recent decades, discussions about the health status of the planet have proliferated in various circles: universities, laboratories, legislative halls, global policy-making conferences, indigenous communities, and now, increasingly, in churches. Just as matters related to "health" become hot topics only when it is detected that one is ill, the same is true when environmental talks are being discussed; the planet's ecological state is quite alarming. In his encyclical Laudato Si' (2015), Pope Francis did not mince words when he said that the earth "now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her." In saying that the Pope did not mince words, we mean that, apart from stating the reality of an ecological crisis on a global scale, it admits that this crisis (or crises, as the case may be) is caused by "our irresponsible use and abuse." In other words, it is humanity - it is us - that is to blame for such devastation.

More than talks or slogans, scientific research that points out the alarming state of our ecology and its apparent implications for the economy, or, quite frankly, for people, especially the poor, is relatively abundant. Since this current essay is a "research" paper, it will cite some recent data and its implications. Not that this current work seeks to be a revolutionary attempt of any sort - it is wishful thinking to do so - but it must be stated that thought-pieces or reflections such as this can only do so little.

But perhaps it is even more alarming, and even scandalous, to say that attempts to cure the environment could, at face value, be said to have been mere band-aid solutions rather than surgical interventions. The point of reflecting on any crisis is activism. Any reflection must be a springboard for action, in the manner that the writings of Jose Rizal are said to have sparked the anti-colonial revolutionary movement of Andres Bonifacio. After all, as the Irish poet Seamus Heaney bluntly points out, "a poem has never stopped a tank." Indeed, an academic paper or a reflection essay cannot stop the possibility that there will be more plastics than fish in the ocean by 2025 (Avanceña, 2018). But it is with faith, hope, and love that this humble essay seeks to contribute to the appeal for a global ecological conversion (Francis, 2015) that is active, after all, "faith without action is dead" (James 2:26).

However, any rallying call for active involvement in fighting for the environment reasonably demands rational grounds before going into action; soldiers need good tactical planning before plunging into war zones, don't they? Since this is a theological reflection with the keyword "moral" in bold letters, as suggested by the title, we take here as a good model the great Dominican theologian St. Thomas Aquinas, who serves as our guide in analyzing and situating ourselves in the engagement that we ought to undertake. The scientific data presented here (which, by the way, is not exhaustive, as the researcher is not a scientist but a student of theology) is probably alien to the world in which Aquinas thrived. Climate change is not a medieval topic of interest. But what we can learn from Aquinas, at the heart of the Dominican tradition, is the capacity for dialogue with a profound sense of openness (Martinez, 1988). In other words, the reflections that are to be spoken of here are

somehow a hypothetical presumption as to how Aquinas would read the facts, evidenced by researched data; how he might reflect on it, and the preacher friar that he is, how he would preach to us about it.

Theology and Ecology

Before presenting pertinent data to show the crisis, the relationship between ecology and theology should be established. Doing so is quite interesting, as it prevents the rigid or manualist view that theology is limited to the traditional study of propositional God-talk, which could easily be tagged as deviant - even "liberal" or "progressive" - innovations that run the risk of not being "traditional." In defining what we ought to mean by "theology" - eventually, about how we will define "ecology" later - here is no means a novel attempt. It is rather, and faithfully, traditional in the sense that theology is properly done in and for the Church [International Theological Commission (ITC), 2013, no. 20], belongs within the Church's *living*, therefore dynamic, tradition as defined by *Dei Verbum*, the Church's dogmatic constitution on Divine Revelation [Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), 1965, no. 8].

Theology: Knowing the God of Order through Order

There are two traditional modes of understanding theology, says the International Theological Commission in its 2013 document *Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria*: (a) as *intellectus fidei* (understanding of faith), and (b) as *scientia Dei* (science of God). These nuances are derived from St. Anselm's classical definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), as well as from what its Greek etymology suggests - the compounding of the words θεος (god) and λογος (science, reason or discourse) - which would mean a *study of* or *discourse on* God. A fitting textbook definition of theology must be that it is a "study of God and his relation to the world" (Gratsch, 1981).

The definitive inclusion of the phrase "relation to the world" is influenced by the Thomistic understanding of theology, precisely because, like other scientific disciplines, theology as a science seeks to acquire specific knowledge of things through their causes (Lonergan, 2007). However, as Aquinas admits, God cannot be known with certainty, since God is not caused and there is no *a priori* knowledge of God [*Summa Theologiae* (ST), I, q.2, aa. 1-2] as science strictly requires. However, Aquinas argues that God can be known through demonstrable effects (ST, I, q.2, a.2), that is to say, the things that we can observe through our natural knowledge that begins in the senses (ST, I, q.12, a.12). The things that we can observe are things that are in the world. Therefore, in a strict scientific sense, we can know God about or *through* the world.

As a scientific discipline, theology implies the need and demand for a systematic discourse on God. In short, theology underscores the need for a systematic understanding of God. However, this demand for order is not limited to mere speculative discourses. In Aquinas's theology, order can be attributed to God in two

distinct ways. First, it is one of the classic *quinque viae* or natural proofs for the existence of God by describing God as an "intelligent being [that] exists by whom all natural things are directed to their end" (ST I, q.2, a.3). Simply put, the observable fact that the world is arranged naturally as such reasonably necessitates order to which all things are directed towards and that from which the order of nature proceeds from. This principle and means of order is what Aquinas would call God. This is evidenced further by the creation narrative in Genesis wherein the Creator ordered things out of chaotic disorder (Genesis 1:2). Secondly, about the moral life, *order* can be understood in the context of law which Aquinas universally defines as "the ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated" (ST I-II, q. 90, a. 4). In particular, human beings - who, by nature, are rational beings (that is to say, having the intellective and volitive faculties) - are governed by the natural moral law which inclines man to tend towards the perfection of his nature as a rational being which, according to Aristotle, is the attainment of perfect goodness or the ευδαιμονια which Aquinas developed and understood to be the beatific vision of God [*Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle* (Comm. Nic. Eth.), Bk. I, lec. 4, § 43; ST I-II, qq. 1-3]. A practical and helpful analogy to prove this point is to compare the natural law to a measuring stick or a ruler, which directs a person to plot or draw a straight line from point A to point B. Point A can be imagined as a man, while point B can be imagined as God. A ruler proposes that a straight line be drawn to connect point A to point B perfectly. Now, even if a ruler is absent, it can be admitted that point A can still be connected to point B; however, a straight line is preferable and rather more reasonable than a crooked line.

Building on these factors - from the etymology itself down to the moral order which we have demonstrated - we can nuance theology as an ordered study of God who reveals himself in the world as a God of order who orders all things to himself - which echoes St. Augustine of Hippo's moving realization: "You move us to delight in praising You; for You have created us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You" (*Confessions*, Bk. I, ch. 1).

Ecology: The Order of the Environment

Ecology, on the other hand, can be referred to as the science, an ordered study, that is, of the interaction of living organisms on the earth. It was first used by the zoologist and naturalist Ernest Haeckel in 1869. Still, for a more technically precise definition, Krebs (1972) enhanced it by referring to it as "the scientific study of the interactions that determine the distribution and abundance of organisms."

Relatedly, the word "environment," which is almost always attached to ecology, refers to "all those factors and phenomena outside the organism that influence it, whether these are physical and chemical (abiotic) or other organisms (biotic)" (Begon, et.al., 2006). In other words, *ecology* can be said to be the law that orders the *environment*. Somewhat similar to our framework on building the definition of theology, by the nature of its very definition, ecology presupposes that there is an

existing order for our common home for living organisms - such as plants, bacteria, animals, and human beings - to exist in harmony or, more precisely, according to the common good.

It is interesting to build the intersection between theology and ecology on the etymological basis of the latter. Ecology is derived from two Greek words: οικος, *meaning* household, and λογος, which is related to the etymology of the word "theology." Now, since λογος has something to do with reason, and that reason presupposes the necessity of order, it can be reasonably proposed to say that ecology is primarily a discourse on the ordering of our common home, that is, our planet, as environmental advocates, scientists, and even by the Pope (Francis, 2015).

It should even be reiterated that the planet we live in is the same world God created in an orderly fashion, the same world where God reveals or makes himself known, and the same world by and through which God can be primarily known. It can even be argued - as distinguished theologians such as Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), Edward Schillebeeckx, and Joseph Martos did imply - that the world and its elements are considerable sacraments or signs which perform revelatory functions, at least in a natural sense (Ratzinger, 2018; Schillebeeckx, 2014; Martos 1994). In his often-cited essay *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis*, Lynn White strongly implied that ecology serves as the basis of "natural theology": "By revelation, God had given man the Bible, the Book of Scripture. However, since God created nature, nature must also reveal the divine mind. The religious study of nature to better understand God was known as natural theology. In the early Church, and always in the Greek East, nature was conceived primarily as a symbolic system through which God speaks to men" (White, 1967). These reflective presumptions are not far-fetched from the fundamental nuance proposed by the Angelic Doctor that sacraments, still without its supernatural distinction, as "signs are given to men, to whom it is proper to discover the unknown by means of the known" (ST III, q. 60, a. 2).

These are affirmed by Scripture, which beautifully illustrates how man is captivated by the ordered beauty of the environment, which we may refer to as *ecology*. The Psalmist, for instance, said that "when I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place: What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him?" and goes to conclude saying "O LORD, our Lord, how awesome is your name throughout all the earth!" (Psalm 8:4-5, 10). Also, the troubled Job, despite his grumblings about the bad things around him, is confronted with these words: "ask the beasts to teach you, the birds of the air to tell you; or speak to the earth to instruct you, and the fish of the sea to inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of God has done this? In his hand is the soul of every living thing" (Job 12:7-10). St. Paul, furthermore, wrote that "ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made" (Romans 1:20).

From these verses, we can reiterate two obvious theological nuances that capture the value of ecology, which we have already defined herein as the "ordered beauty of the environment".

First, it should be acknowledged that human beings can know God through the *environment* (that is to say, the place where the interaction of biotic and abiotic organisms among themselves), but more precisely through *ecology* in as inasmuch as, as the Bible and even natural science agree, there is beauty so long as the ordered design of nature is followed. This nuance is affirmed by the Angelic Doctor, who defined beauty as that "which consists in due proportion" that delights the cognitive faculty (ST I, q. 5, a. 4), which can be paraphrased as that which consists of balance, which, in turn, connotes order. Now, just as things are ordered toward the perfection of their respective natures, man, too, and most especially, is ordered toward his perfection that consists of his ultimate end, which consists of beauty that causes happiness, delight, and pleasure that can be apprehended cognitively. At length, St. Thomas said: "For since good is what all seek, the notion of good is that which calms the desire; while the notion of the beautiful is that which calms the desire, by being seen or known. Consequently, those senses chiefly regard the beautiful, which are the most cognitive, [such as] sight and hearing, as ministering to reason…Thus it is evident that beauty adds to goodness a relation to the cognitive faculty: so that 'good' means that which simply pleases the appetite; while the 'beautiful' is something pleasant to apprehend" (ST I-II q. 27, a. 1). Hence, it can be said that by ecology - that is the "beautiful order" in and of the environment - man can naturally apprehend God in and of whom the perfection of beauty *himself* can be attributed (ST I, q. 13, a. 6).

Secondly, it can be affirmed that, through *order* or *ordered beauty* - that is, *ecology*, God wishes to reveal Himself supernaturally to perfect man's natural tendency towards goodness, for He Himself is perfect goodness. This, too, is affirmed by St. Thomas who said that "God is in all things…as an agent that is present to that upon which it works" (ST I, q. 8, a. 1) and that, as Creator, he is the exemplar and final cause of all things (ST I q. 44, aa. 3-4). Moreover, as the omnipotent creative agent of all things - that is to say, in scientific terms, the environment in which biotic and abiotic substances exist in an orderly or ecological fashion - God is that by which whose existence all things participate in for their very existence (ST I, q. 44, a. 1).

The Ecological Situation

It can be said outright that humans play a pivotal moral role at the intersection of theology and ecology. By far, all that we have told of theology and ecology are things primarily apprehended by man through his cognitive and voluntary faculties. Man, after all, in the mind of Aquinas is a *micorcosmos* "for he mirrors the unity in diversity of the world out there within the development of time [and that he] could reach back to and be inspired by the past; be conscious about and innovate the present; and it could project towards and be challenged by the future" (Aureada, 2000). This, therefore, inclines us to the fact that the environmental disorder, which we ought to

refer to as the ecological crisis, imposes accountability and moral responsibility, primarily, on man.

In proceeding to describe the ecological situation, we are going to, first, tell the ecological crisis through the scientific and factual assessment culled from credible observable data; secondly, we will trace the historical development of this crisis and its epistemological roots, and lastly, theologically establish, through the pertinent teachings of the Church, man's active moral role in the ecological crisis.

The Ecological Crisis

Three decades ago, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Henry Kendall and the Union of Concerned Scientists (1992) issued a stirring clarion call: "Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible environmental damage and critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know".

As if that were not enough, roughly three decades later, more than 15,000 scientists from 184 countries stated, "We are jeopardizing our future by not reining in our intense but geographically and demographically uneven material consumption" (Ripple et al., 2017).

Non-governmental and nonpartisan think tank Commission for the Human Future (CHF) identified ten ecological risks hat accordingly require urgent attention: (1) The decline of key natural resources and an emerging global resource crisis, especially in water; (2) The collapse of ecosystems that support life, and the mass extinction of species; (3) Human population growth and demand, beyond the Earth's carrying capacity; (4) Global warming, sea-level rise, and changes in the Earth's climate affecting all human activity; (5) Universal pollution of the Earth system and all life by chemicals; (6) Rising food insecurity and failing nutritional quality; (7) Nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction; (8) Pandemics of new and untreatable disease; (9) The advent of powerful, uncontrolled new technologies, and; (10)National and global failure to understand and act preventively on these risks" (CHF, 2020).

Sufficient and scientifically well-researched data backs these clarion calls and summaries. A report by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) states that the 2010s (that is, from 2011 to 2020) proved to have manifested serious climate concerns:

"(1) *It was the warmest decade on record by a clear margin for both land and ocean.* Each successive decade since the 1990s has been warmer than all previous decades.

"(2) *Atmospheric concentrations of the three major greenhouse gases increased over the decade*. Emissions must be significantly and sustainably reduced to stabilize the climate and prevent further warming. The ozone hole was smaller in 2011-2020 than during the previous two decades.

"(3) *Rates of ocean warming and acidification are increasing*. Marine heatwaves are becoming more frequent and intense. In any given year between 2011 and 2020,

approximately 60% of the ocean's surface experienced a heatwave. Global mean sea level rise is accelerating, primarily due to ocean warming and the loss of land ice mass. Between 2011 and 2020, the sea level rose at an annual rate of 4.5 millimeters per year.

"(4) *Glaciers that were measured worldwide thinned by approximately 1 meter per year on average between 2011 and 2020.* Greenland and Antarctica lost 38% more ice between 2011 and 2020 than they did between 2001 and 2010. This is consistent with an acceleration of ice sheet mass loss. Arctic sea ice extent continues to decline over multiple decades: the seasonal mean minimum was 30% below average.

"(5) *Extreme events across the decade had devastating impacts, particularly on food security and human mobility, hindering national development and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). Virtually every attribution study on an extreme heat event in the decade 2011-2020 found that the likelihood of the event increased significantly because of anthropogenic climate change. Heat Waves were responsible for the highest number of human casualties, while tropical cyclones caused the most economic damage" (WMO, 2023).

Recognizing the interdependence of ecosystems and biodiversity and that of human societies, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), in a report (2023), stressed that these realities reflect the increasing diversity of actors involved in climate action.

For instance, it said that "human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gases, have unequivocally caused global warming, with global surface temperature reaching 1.1°C above 1850–1900 in 2011–2020. Global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals" (IPCC, 2023).

Additionally, human activities that contribute to climate imbalance not only affect natural environmental resources but also impact people, particularly the most vulnerable sectors of society. The IPCC (2023) further reports that: "Economic damages from climate change have been detected in climate-exposed sectors, such as agriculture, forestry, fishery, energy, and tourism. Individual livelihoods have been affected through, for example, destruction of homes and infrastructure, and loss of property and income, human health, and food security, with adverse effects on gender and social equity."

These facts seemingly led Pope Francis to strongly describe the situation of our οικος as an "immense pile of filth" (Francis, 2015). In the first chapter of his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Holy Father spoke of pollution and climate change (nos. 20-25), the apparent scarcity of water resources (nos. 27-31), loss of biodiversity (nos. 32-42), decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society (nos. 43-47), global inequality (nos. 48-52), and the "weak responses" to these challenges among prominent role-playing and policy-making sectors (nos. 53-59).

Development of the Ecological Crisis

A crucial role player in the entirety of the ecological crisis is *man*. Hence, it can be said that the development of the ecological crisis is inextricably linked to human history, as man is conditioned by the environment, the ecological order to which he belongs as an organism, and since man can manipulate this ecological order. Thus, in describing the development of the ecological crisis, we will first identify how man, throughout history, has manipulated the ecological order, with a particular focus on the rapid growth of the crisis after the Second World War. Secondly, we will identify the dominant epistemological framework by which man seems conditioned to relate to the planet.

By interfering with the planet's natural ecological order, humans have accordingly "taken charge" of the ecosystem (Oosthoek & Gills, 2008). When humans began their first agricultural activities around 3,000 to 8,000 years ago, the first anthropogenic global warming occurred, thereby altering the global climate systems (Ruddiman, 2005).

Historically speaking, human activities are inevitably manipulations of the environment: from planting crops, consuming animal flesh as food, the formation of domestic settlements, crafting of weapons for hunting and defense, as well as the construction of means to systematically preserve and consume our economic needs (i.e., from mere water systems to governmental structures, etc.). All human activities fall within the ambit of ecology. While these technological advancements have brought progress and development to humanity, they have nonetheless caused adverse effects on the environment. For instance, in 1285, London had to endure a smog crisis due to the burning of soft coal, and in the early 14th century, when cannons were invented, the first hints of mineral erosion and deforestation were forced by the resourcing of potash, sulfur, iron ore, and charcoal (White, 1967).

However, as many authors have pointed out, it can be argued that the Industrial Revolution, which coincided with the capitalist economic framework, served as a major springboard that contributed to the current global ecological crisis (Droz, 2022). Fremaux (2019) said that "[the] global ecological crisis reveals these interlinked disasters caused by the core components of capitalism that include: an excessive exploitation of nature, the rise of industrialism, the self-destructive overconfidence in human-technical power, the arrogant anthropocentric mindset, and denial of ecological limits, as well as the narrow rationalism and materialism that develop within a reductionist predominant form of science".

Only after the Second World War did governments begin to echo contemporary ecological concerns. Oosthoek and Gills (2008) stated that in the 1950s, the British and American governments implemented legislative measures to combat air pollution as concerns about the use of chemicals in agriculture grew. Biologists Rachel Carson and Barry Commoner were two prominent American scientists who first drew the attention of their peers and the world to this looming threat. They pioneered the environmental movement in the United States, which quickly spread across the globe.

Through their books, *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962) and *The Closing Circle. Man, Nature, and Technology* (Commoner, 1974) seemed to have prophesied the world's fast-escalating abnormal condition of our ecosphere. They pointed out that if any of our irresponsible activities, in any given time or place, strikes a discordant note through their frequent disruptions on the well-ordered rhythm of nature and the consequential result exceeds the carrying capacity of the ecosystems, for sure, the collapse of the entire ecosphere, as a whole and of the whole universe, cannot not be avoided (Carson, 1962; Commoner, 1971).

However, despite these strong-worded warnings and despite the many legislative measures to prevent local or regional air and water pollution as well as the contamination of soils and as well the attempts of efficiently regulating energy resources (perhaps due to to the energy crises of 1973-1979), by the 1980s, scientists discovered two significant ecological disturbances that are primarily caused by human activities: (1) the thinning of the stratospheric ozone layer over the polar regions of the world, and (2) global warming caused by massive use of fossil fuels releasing large amounts of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere (Oosthoek & Gills, 2008).

The historical development of the ecological crisis which we have economically narrated leads us to conclude that two moral and epistemological layers describe man's role in the environmental crisis: first, is the seeming "primacy of the economy and the idea of limitless expansion of production and consumption regardless of the real environmental costs and consequences" (Oosthoek & Gills, 2008), and, secondly, anthropocentrism - an ideological dogma that can somehow be described as that which puts man's political and economic interests as the principle of all human activities (Droz, 2000).

Since "what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship" (White, 1967), further anthropocentrism can be elaborated. It seems that there are two fundamental directions to which anthropocentrism is leading. We propose to call them: (1) scientific impersonalism, and (2) religious indifferentism.

By scientific impersonalism, we mean the anthropocentric attitude wherein humans seek to achieve material goods seemingly devoid of human affectivity. The confession of Charles Darwin can best illustrate this: "Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds...gave me great pleasure...even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare...But now, for many years, I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost my taste for pictures or music… My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts" (Darwin, 1893; Murray, 2013).

On the other hand, religious indifferentism is an anthropocentric attitude which, according to a heavily charged article written more than 50 years ago, insists "that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White, 1967). Such "indifferentism" can allegedly be rooted in the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation that stresses the biblical mandate of man's superiority over nature (Genesis 1:28), which, in

effect, makes man totally superior to nature that merely looks at irrational organisms (i.e., trees, animals) and other inanimate minerals as mere physical facts. Hence, by neglecting their value according to the ecological order (White, 1967), man has tended "to devalue matter and the material world [that resulted in] the dichotomy between God and earthly things" (Aureada, 2000). Thus, it can be said that even if contemporary sciences and technological advancements are highly secular and even atheistic (Jackson & Jensen, 2022), hints of anthropocentric religious indifferentism towards the environment can be somewhat traced and related to Christian theology (White, 1967), the ideological framework by which most Western universities were formed.

The Church's Teachings on Ecology

It can be said that the Church has recognized what can be referred to as the *Ecozoic Age,* which is described as the third millennium as an era that enhances human-earth relationships in an ecocentric manner (Berry & Clarke, 1991). Since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum,* often regarded as the first "social" encyclical, the Church has emphasized the importance of ecology by situating the environmental question within the broader context of justice and the common good (Aureada, 2000).

Before Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the local Church in the Philippines, through the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), had been quite vocal in reiterating the Church's concern for the environment through 11 pastoral letters written from 1988 to 2019 (Peracullo, 2023). Foreign observers have even concluded that the Roman Catholic Church is practically the only institution Filipinos can trust to speak out against environmental abuses (Tremlett, 2013).

Peracullo (2021) has identified six themes in these CBCP letters: (1) the abundance of the country's natural resources, (2) environmental degradation and its consequences, (3) the climate crisis and emergency, (4) the call to not lose hope, (5) pro-life initiatives in relation to the integrity of creation, and (6) the call for ecological conversion or resolution.

The first CBCP pastoral letter on the environment ("What is happening to our beautiful land", 1988) pointed out that "[the] devastation of life on earth calls for the faithful to defend life as they reflect on the beauty of nature and partake of her bounty, which nourishes life" (Peracullo, 2023). Filipino Bishops beautifully echo this: "Our land is rich, yet over-exploitation threatens the future of our people. Therefore, we must guard our non-renewable resources, like minerals, to ensure the sustainable development of our land for the sake of future generations" (CBCP, 1988).

They also collectively admonished Filipino Christians "to bear witness to Christ [such that one] area where we can do this is in our concern for the environment" (CBCP, 2000). Thus, "Caring for the Earth means caring for the most oppressed and the poorest sectors of human and biotic communities" (Peracullo, 2023). In other words, Percullo (2023) says that by recognizing the natural world's importance, the

CBCP "[rejected] hard anthropocentrism in favor of a more ecocentric discourse on nature".

Aureada's (2000) summary of the Church's social teachings on the environment, which we have briefly mentioned above, is somewhat affirmed 15 years later by *Laudato Si',* which has contributed much to the Church's position on the environmental crisis by providing a framework for environmental stewardship (Francis, 2015; Waterman, 2017).

Moral Dimensions of the Ecological Crisis

It is evident and undeniable that this ecological crisis stems from our flawed mental framework. This problem demands an ethical inquiry to help rectify our erroneous attitude. We will use the ethical teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, buttressed by the moral views of other philosophers, in common with the Angelic Doctor's line of thought and the works of Aristotle, to reach a clear and objective ethical evaluation of this predicament.

The Eternal Law and the Natural Law

As we contemplate creation, we could perceive beauty and symmetry among the universe's various celestial bodies as if they follow a preordained order. St. Thomas points this by implying that this order in the cosmos signifies that there is someone in the universe (so omniscience and) so omnipotent to necessitate everything, either it be animate or inanimate beings to follow their proper disposition toward their end (see ST I–II. q. 90). This order is consequential to a mandate prescribed by the One who has the governance and directs the movements of all bodies in the universe. (ST I-II, q.2. a.3).

The Angelic Doctor describes this mandate as a law. In a general way, he defines this, "as an ordinance of reason, promulgated, and enforced by the one who has the charge of the community for the common good" (ST I-II, q. 90, a. 4). This definition of law forwarded by St. Thomas fulfills all the necessary constituent elements of a true law. Any mandate, precept, or ordinance that has the semblance of a law but lacks any of the constituent attributes of a true law is not a law but its perversion and has no binding power over us. So, no man could ever be coerced, nor could he be intimidated, nor has any obligation to observe and follow.

St. Thomas further adds that there are four species of Law; namely: the Eternal Law, the Natural Law, the Human Law, and the Divine Law (ST I-II, q. 90, a. 2). Since, all these laws proceed from the Will of the Divine Lawgiver as their origin, so, it follows that these have the same common end. We shall focus only on the Eternal Law and the Natural Law.

The presence of order in the created world was posited by the full intent of the divine Lawgiver and not due to any accident, by random, by chance, or by luck. This law is the concrete manifestation of the Supreme Lawgiver's will and is ontologically

embedded in every nature of all beings, ordering them toward their own end. St. Thomas calls this law the "Eternal Law".

He reasons out that since the Divine Architect's conception of things is not subject to time but is eternal, this kind of law must be called eternal (ST I-II, q. 91, a.1). This Law extends through all eternity and to the vast expanse of the universe. St. Thomas stresses that this Law, "commands all that the natural ordering of the things in the universe should be respected, and preserved, and forbidding that it will be disturbed" (ST I-II, q. 90, a. 1). So, all beings in the universe are bound to act in accordance with their own nature in a preordained course towards their own perfection, and the perfection of the universe, as a unified whole.

Aquinas also teaches that aside from the Eternal Law, there is another law he calls the Natural Law. This law expresses the Eternal Law and applies exclusively to man, a rational animal. This law is "man's participation in the eternal law" (S.T. I-II, q. 91, a. 1-2). Man's understanding of the Eternal law, as revealed to him by his reason, also serves as the ethical norm that governs his behavior. Since Natural Law is given by God to the entire human species and is fully knowable by all men, it follows that it is naturally authoritative.

Natural Law is universal and immutable. As said, it embraces the whole of humanity, regardless of one's color, country, or creed. It is exempt from any mutation or limitation affected by all circumstances. Like the Eternal Law, its influence extends beyond the confines of time. St. Thomas avers that since this Law contains all the precepts of Eternal Law governing the behavior of all rational beings, the "Eternal Law is the Natural Law applied to human beings" (ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2).

Aquinas explains this fact clearly by saying that "among all others, the rational creature is subject to Divine Providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself, and for others. Wherefore, it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end" (ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2). So, it is man alone who possesses the ethical valuation of his acts, whether it is good or evil. This fundamental precept of the Natural Law becomes an 'imperative' to "pursue and do what is good and to avoid evil" (ST I-II, q. 91, a. 2). Every time man acts in consonance with his nature, he acts freely. The Angelic Doctor adds that "all [human] acts are perfectly voluntary for these emanate from the knowledge of the end of an action, understood as an end of action, and from the knowledge that the act is a means to the end apprehended" (ST I-II, q. 6, a. 2).

All acts of man that proceed from him as a rational agent are all perfect human acts, for these ensued from the will following the knowledge and judgment of the intellect. But if man's voluntariness is absent, diminished, or impeded due to ignorance, passion, fear, violence, habit, temperament, or pathological state, then his act could not be considered a proper human act but a mere act of man, for it does not proceed from the deliberation of his reason. The agent is not culpable for his act. St. Thomas advances that "a proper human act must be a product of our own free

judgment, the exercise of which is a function of both intellect and will" (ST I, q. 83, a. 3). It follows then that since it is evil for man to direct himself contrary to the good. His actions must be performed consistently in a fitting manner, according to his reason. Finally, the ascendancy of this Law excludes plants and brutes, for Natural Law, as shown, is ontologically connatural only with man's rational nature. So, Natural Law is always nowhere to be found in any animate beings, except man.

Common Good

Common Good, according to its primary and generally accepted sense, "is the sum total of all social conditions necessary for man as a part of the whole or for a group of men to attain his (their) full potential in a community" (Chapman, 2014). In common parlance, the common good refers to the sum total or entirety of all social conditions and facilities, whether cultural, political, or religious, that every individual member of society needs to attain their full potential as a human being.

Aristotle, in his book, *Politics*, to which St. Thomas accedes, asserted "that man is not only a rational but also a political being" (Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. I, ch. 3). This is the reason why man is at all times inclined to be political, that is, to interact, to live, and so to find his completion in a community. Only then can man be a part of the social whole and fulfill his completeness with the facility. For man to live in a community is a practical arrangement and a natural necessity.

St. Thomas observes that only human beings possess the ability to speak. Through their words, men communicate with one another and convey their ideas in creating a political society for their common Good. The Angelic Doctor also perceives that man's various physical characteristics necessitate him to live in communion with his fellow men to provide his basic needs [*Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*, Bk.. 1, lec. 1).

In any community, the attainment and preservation of the common Good necessitates the presence of justice. Justice serves as a *conditio sine qua non* - a condition without which no state nor any social whole would come to exist and persist. Justice, as the Angelic Doctor defines it, is "a virtue that directs man in his relation with other man, in his relations to others according to some kind of equality or rightness" (ST II-II, q. 57, a.1). Justice then is perceived as "a virtue that helps to structure a community" (Porter, 2016). So, everyone who is a member of a social whole stands to that community as a part to a whole (ST II-II, q. 58, a. 5). This part now belongs to the whole. Whatever good is in the part is now directed to the whole, and whatever affects the part, whether it be beneficial or harmful, also affects the whole. The focus of general justice is the common good of the social whole. This justice serves as a means for attaining and preserving the Common Good.

In other words, the presence of justice always results in the Common Good of a social whole. For this reason, we should demand that our political leaders enact laws that regulate all members of society, including themselves, in ways that benefit everyone in the community.

It is clear then that the Common Good of the social whole is the presence of the sum total or the entirety of all social conditions necessary for man to attain his full potential.

St. Thomas finally states that since the Common Good of the social whole is connatural with man's personal Good, it must follow that this Good is directed hierarchically towards another good until the social whole has attained its Final Uncreated Good (ST I-II, q. 90, a. 2).

The universe is analogous to an automobile. An automobile is a composite of various parts forming an organic unity. Each of these parts works in consonance with its function or nature and, in a consolidated manner, operates together towards a common goal. The consequence of this orderly operation is that the automobile, as an organic whole, remains in a constant and efficient state.

On the other hand, the universe is also a complex system of various celestial bodies that form an organic whole, with each part having its distinct purpose. If all these celestial bodies work for one common goal, then an order exists responsible for the universe's constant homeostatic equilibrium.

So, the Common Good of the universe is the presence of the entirety or the sum total of well-ordered operations of the different celestial bodies working for one common purpose. This Common Good of the universe, like the Good of man and the Common Good of the social whole, is also ontologically ordained to its uncreated Final Good.

The final good or end of everything, including man, is their completion or perfection. St. Thomas calls this final good God, the ultimate perfection of all beings.

By essence, God is goodness. And God intends to share his goodness with all creatures for their perfection (ST I, q. 44, a. 4), even the contingent ones. So, all created beings originate from God as their principle and return to God as their ultimate fulfillment. To participate in this goodness means the attainment of the final perfection and satisfaction of every man's longing and striving, and the attainment of every being in the universe of their final completion.

The Angelic Doctor writes of this fact, "it does not belong to the First Agent, Who, is agent only, to act for the acquisition of some end; He intends to communicate only His perfection, which is His goodness; while every creature intends only to acquire its perfection, which is the likeness of the divine perfection and goodness. Therefore, divine goodness is the end of all things" (ST I, q. 44, a. 4).

However, it is only in the afterlife that man can attain this final Happiness through beatific vision, which can only be made possible through a virtuous earthly life aided by supernatural help from God (ST I-II, q. 1, a. 8).

Conclusion

For eons, this natural arrangement in the universe has remained delicately balanced due to the presence of order. Although humans introduced some changes in this fragile order during the Neolithic Age, these modifications were insufficient to

generate substantial alterations in this natural arrangement, as human technology was still in its primitive stage.

Significant detrimental impacts started to occur during the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Despite economic prosperity and betterment of life these Industrial Revolutions have endowed on humanity, in their wake are found deleterious effects of significant proportion. These impacts have significantly altered the delicate balance and symmetry of our natural world and drastically changed the relationship between humans and nature.

Scrutinized under the lens of St. Thomas' ethical teachings, as found in his Treatise on Law and the Common Good, and those of his confreres, this crisis and its causal factors are gross violations of God's will in all its forms. At the same time, these are also perceived as impediments to attaining all the parts of the universe, and the entire universe as an organic whole, of their Common Good.

Therefore, this crisis and all its causal factors are immoral.

First, it is a violation of the natural law and impedes man in the attainment of his own Good.

In man, particular natural inclinations are found by which he is directed towards his happiness. All his acts must be deliberate and voluntary to be in consonance with his natural inclinations to attain this end.

Man could only be held responsible for the evil effects of a cause directly willed provided three conditions are present: a) he can readily foresee the evil effect (at least in a general way); b) when he is free to refrain from doing what causes the evil effect; and c) when he is bound to refrain from doing what causes the evil effect.

Since all the essential elements of a perfectly voluntary act (full knowledge and full intention) are present in the human agent in an antecedent, concomitant, and even in a subsequent manner in performing these nefarious activities, he is then directly culpable. He defies the dictates of the fundamental principle of the Natural Law, and at the same time, he also obstructs the attainment of his own perfection.

So, anything that precludes man, in this case, his deliberate defiance of the dictates of his reason, is violative of the Natural Law, and at the same time, bars him from acquiring his personal perfection.

These, then, are immoral.

Second, **it contravenes the common Good of the social whole.**

As a rational and political being, man is designed and necessitated by his nature to live and interact with his fellow men in a community. Only in a social whole can man find the facility to attain his well-being. Since man is a part of this organic unity, he belongs to it. So, whatever good is found in him is always directed to the social whole.

Since this crisis and its causal factors prevent the members of society from rendering to the social whole what is good in them, these repudiate the demand of general justice for the judicious distribution of all the social conditions necessary for the common Good. These are then considered violative of general justice and,

simultaneously, of the environmental precepts, which are expressions of natural law and obstruct the attainment of the social whole of its common good.

Therefore, these are immoral.

Third, **it violates the Eternal Law and bars the Common Good of the Universe.**

As shown, every action, every movement, and every operation of all beings in the universe is directed toward their common Good. Therefore, all its parts, without exception, should obey an order to maintain stable homeostasis.

However, certain deleterious activities introduced by humans in their natural environment cause significant disturbances in this inherent order. This, in turn, will create a serious imbalance in the delicate balance of the ecosphere. If this impact exceeds the carrying capacity of the latter, it will disrupt the balance of the ecosphere. In the manner of a domino effect, it will disrupt the balance of everything, causing chaos in the universe and even within the universe itself.

So, any disruption effected in this inherent order and balance is a direct contravention of the Eternal Law and simultaneously impedes the attainment of the Common Good of everything in the universe and the whole universe as an organic unity.

These, then, are immoral.

Fourth, **it is a gross contempt of God's will and impedes the attainment of all beings of their Final End.**

Since a Law expresses God's will, it demands absolute obedience from the whole creation.

This crisis and its causal factors are a gross contempt of God's will. These were performed through man's perfect voluntary acts and were done not only once or twice but repetitively and maliciously.

As such, these are then perceived as blatant contempt of the Will of the divine Lawgiver and as impediments to every being in attaining their final uncreated Good.

Therefore, these are immoral.

As a final word, unless we undergo a radical paradigm shift in our current mindset and attune it to the rhythm of nature's workings, sooner or later, we will find ourselves crossing our own Rubicon and, with Julius Caesar, together say: "***Alea iacta est*!**"

References

[1] Aquinas, Thomas. (1947). The Summa Theologiae (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). Benziger Bros.

[2] Aquinas, Thomas. Commentary on Aristotle's Physics. Corpus Thomisticum. https://isidore.co/aquinas/Physics.htm.

[3] Aristotle. (2006). Physics: Books I & II (William Charlton, Trans.) Oxford University Press.

[4] Aureada, Jose Antonio. (2000). Thomistic Anthropology, Eschatology and the Challenge of Ecology. Philippiniana Sacra, 35 (105), 401-427.
[5] Avanceña, Ricky. (2018). The Philippine environment: Epicenter of wealth, beauty and destruction. Asia Pacific Perspectives, 15 (2), 55-57. Accessed through: usfca.edu/center-asia-pacific/ perspectives/v15n2/avancena
[6] Bayod, Rogelio. (2020). Communing with mother earth: Indigenous way to care and manage the ecosystem. Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy, 6 (1), 88-107.
[7] Begon, M, et. al. (2006). Ecology: From individuals to ecosystems. Blackwell Publishing.
[8] Berry, T. & Clarke, T. (1991). Befriending the earth: A theology of reconciliation between humans and the earth. Twenty-Third Publications.
[9] Carson, Rachel. (1962). Silent spring. Houghton Mifflin.
[10] Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). (1988). What is happening to our beautiful land? Pastoral Letter. Accessed through http://cbcponline.net/what-is- happening-to-our-beautiful-land/
[11] CBCP. (2000). Water is life. Pastoral Letter. Accessed through https://cbcponline.net/water-is-life/
[12] Cobb, John. (2021). Is it too Late? A Theology of Ecology. Fortress Press.
[13] Commission for the Human Future (CHF). (2020). Surviving and Thriving in the 21st Century. Accessed through https://humanfuture.net/sites/default/files/CHF_Roundtable_Report_March_2020.pdf
[14] Commoner, Barry. (1974). The closing circle: Nature, man and technology. Bantam Books.
[15] Droz, Laÿna. (2022). Anthropocentrism as the scapegoat of the environmental crisis: a review. Ethics in Science and Environmental Politics, 22, 25-49. doi: https://doi.org/10.3354/esep00200
[16] Edwards, Denis. (2016). 'Sublime communion': The theology of the natural world in Laudato si'. Theological Studies, 77 (2), 377-391. doi: https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563916635119
[17] Foster, Matthew. (2016). The human relationship to nature: The limit of reason, the basis of value, and the crisis of environmental ethics. Lexington Books.
[18] Francis. (2015). Laudato Si'. Accessed through https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
[19] Fremaux, A. (2019). After the Anthropocene: green republicanism in a post-capitalist world. Springer.
[20] Gratsch, Edward (ed.), et. al. (1981). Principles of Catholic theology. Alba House.

[21] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2023). Climate change 2023: A synthesis report. doi: https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647

[22] Jackson, W. & Jensen, R. (2022). An inconvenient apocalypse: Environmental collapse, climate crisis, and the fate of humanity. University of Notre Dame Press.

[23] Johnson, Elizabeth. (2009). An earthly Christology. America, 200 (12), 27-30.

[24] Kendall, Henry., et. al. (1992). World scientists' warning to humanity. http://www.ucsusa.org/resources/1992-world-scientists-warning-humanity

[25] Krebs, C.J. (1972). Ecology. Harper & Row.

[26] Kirylo, James. (2023). The Catholic Teacher: Teaching for social justice with faith, hope, and love. Bloomsbury.

[27] Lasco, R. et. al. (2008). Climate change and forest ecosystems in the Philippines: Vulnerability, adaptation and mitigation. Journal of Environmental Science and Management, 11 (1), 1-14.

[28] Lonergan, Bernard. (2007). The Triune God: Systematics. University of Toronto Press.

[29] Martinez, Felicisimo. (1988). The mission of the Dominican order today. Philippiniana Sacra, 23 (67), 23-54.

[30] Martos, Joseph. (1991). Doors to the sacred: A historical introduction to sacraments in the Catholic church. Triumph Books.

[31] McLaughlin, R.P. (2013). Thomas Aquinas' eco-theological ethics of anthropocentric conservation. Horizons, 39 (1), 69-97. doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0360966900008549

[32] Murray, Paul. (2013). Aquinas at prayer: The bible, mysticism and poetry. Bloomsbury.

[33] Oosthoek, J. & Gills, B., eds. (2008). The globalization of the environmental crisis. Routledge.

[34] Ocampo, L.M.A. (2023). The Salamanca Process as an Embodiment of Dominican Charism Today. Philippiniana Sacra, 58 (177), 491-514. doi: https://doi.org/10.55997/3002pslviii177a2

[35] Peracullo, Jeane. (2023). Is the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines turning dark green? Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines' environmentalism from anti-mining to climate crisis response. International Journal of Practical Theology, 27 (1), 7-22. doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/ijpt-2021-0065

[36] Ratzinger, Joseph (Benedict XVI). (2022). The Divine Project: Reflections on creation and church. Ignatius Press.

[37] Ripple, W. J., et al. (2017). World scientists' warning to humanity: A second notice. BioScience 67 (12), 1026–28. https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/12/1026/4605229

[38] Ruddiman, W. F. (2005). How did humans first alter global climate? Scientific American, 292 (3), 34–41. Accessed through https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-did-humans-first-alte/

[39] Schillebeeckx OP, Edward. (2014). World and Church. Bloomsbury.

[40] Second Vatican Council. (1965). Dei verbum: Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation. Accessed through https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html

[41] Superio, M.D. & Abreo, N.A. (2020). Plastic in freshwater ecosystems: A looming crisis in the Philippines. Philippine Science Letters, 13 (1), 1-3.

[42] Tremlett, Paul-Francoise. (2013). The ancestral sensorium and the city: Reflections on religion, environmentalism, and citizenship in the Philippines. Handbook of contemporary animism (G. Harvey, ed.). Acumen.

[43] Waterman, A.M.C. (2017). Pope Francis on the environmental crisis. The Independent Review, 21 (3), 375-398.

[44] White, Lynn. (1967). The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. Science, 155 (3767), 1203-1207.

[45] World Meteorological Organization (WMO). (2023). The global climate 2011-2020: A decade of accelerating climate change. WMO Publications Board.