General Introduction

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The question of environmental justice occupies the thoughts of many people today—much more so, it seems, than past eras due to the grave effects of environmental degradation. Yet in pondering this issue we might like, as Pope Francis encourages us in his encyclical Laudato si’, to stress “the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and throwaway culture.”¹ The natural outcomes of our current system and the problems of environmental injustice are being confronted throughout the world in various forms of pollution, solid and liquid waste, climate change, water scarcity, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, depletion of natural resources as a result of accelerated modes of production, and urban congestion. This occurs, it should go without saying, to benefit the developmental priorities that unfairly favor the interests of a small, select group of stakeholders. Still it has become increasingly apparent that urgent action is needed to prevent further environmental degradation, and that every person of good will has the moral responsibility to work for the benefit of environmental justice.

In recent decades, the Catholic Church has increasingly realized its role in this environmental matter, repeatedly calling upon Catholics—and those beyond the confessional parameters—to acknowledge the injustice and that coincides with the environmental devastation that is occurring. Several contemporary pontiffs—specifically Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI—are protagonists, in this respect, articulating a Catholic environmental ethics by exhorting the church to become active participants in safeguarding environment. In the apostolic letter Octogesima adveniens, Paul VI warns against the tragic consequences of unchecked human activity upon ecosystems: “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he

risks destroying it and becoming in turn the victim of this degradation.”
John Paul II, in turn, cautions against the materialistic tendency of contemporary
society that regards nature simply in utilitarian terms: “Man often seems to
see no other meaning in his natural environment than what serves for imme-
diate use and consumption.”
Benedict XVI, the pope emeritus, writes more
recently that the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build up God’s garden for
all to dwell in, but instead serves the powers of exploitation and destruction.
The pope is saying this because of the alienation of large number of people
from true progress and due to the vast gap that exists between the rich and
the poor.

Yet at this critical juncture, as the global community is beginning to confront
these environmental challenges, Pope Francis’s historic encyclical Laudato si’
invites his global audience towards a renewed relationship with “our common
home,” to relate to nature as God’s gift. Having highlighted the root causes of
our present environmental dilemma, Francis formulates his ethical challenge
to elucidate that humans have the capacity to shape our planetary future con-
structively and in a sustainable manner. Such care for creation, he asserts, is
not just the task of politicians or the business elite, but in truth everyone “can
cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his
or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.”

For our purposes, this particular encyclical serves as a catalyst for inquiry
and reflection on not only theological themes, but to bring ecological topics
and issues to the forefront with specific reference to the Society of Jesus. The
pope, himself a Jesuit, of course plays a prominent role in this narrative and
in fostering a conversation on a global stage at this critical point. Yet the inti-
mate relation between Jesuits and nature has much deeper roots that are set
within the foundations of the Society, the seeds of which can be found in Ig-
natian spirituality. Since the inception of the Society with Saint Ignatius of
Loyola and his first companions, the intense study of nature represents an in-
tegral part of the Jesuit “way of proceeding” with regard to both spiritual and
intellectual formation. In those earliest generations, the pedagogical task of

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5 Francis, Laudato si’, n. 14.