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# Solidarity, Subsidiarity, and Preference for the Poor: Extending Catholic Social Teaching In Response to the Climate Crisis

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SOLIDARITY, SUBSIDIARITY, &  
PREFERENCE FOR THE POOR

EXTENDING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN  
RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

*Jame Schaefer*

**G**rounding Catholic social thought is the belief that each human person has an intrinsic dignity and a desire for relationships with others that should lead to cooperating for their mutual good, making decisions individually and collectively to achieve it, and showing preference for the poor, vulnerable, and suffering in decision-making and actions. Rooted in the sacred scriptures, reflected upon at least implicitly for centuries by theologians, and taught by bishops of the Roman Catholic Church (the magisterium), principles to guide our decision-making and actions began to be considered collectively toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as “Catholic social teaching” through which the bishops direct the faithful in living lovingly in relation to one another because of their relationship with God. Most prominent among the popes who issued explicit directives in response to societal problems during their times was Leo XIII. In 1891, he underscored in *Rerum Novarum* the dignity, rights, and responsibilities of humans laboring in the newly burgeoning industrial economy. Subsequent popes have conveyed their social teachings primarily through encyclicals in which they address new and continuing issues, and other bishops have reflected upon these papal documents when issuing pastoral statements to their constituents. Basic to these teachings is the necessity to cherish the life and inherent dignity of the human person from conception to bodily death. As the Catholic bishops in the United States insist: “This central Catholic principle requires that we measure every policy,

every institution, and every action by whether it protects human life and enhances human dignity, especially for the poor and vulnerable” (USCCB 1998).

One of the latest principles to emerge from these teachings in response to escalating environmental problems is the necessity for the faithful to show respect for God by protecting and caring for God’s creation. Pope John Paul II issued the first dedicated statement on this principle in his message celebrating the 1990 World Day of Peace entitled *Peace with God the Creator, Peace with All of Creation*. In this message, he lamented the ongoing destruction of the natural environment, declared its adverse affects on human life as a moral problem for which people at all levels of endeavor are responsible to address, and directed the faithful to “respect and watch over” God’s creation “in light of that greater and higher fraternity that exists within the human family” (1989, #16). He integrated this teaching in numerous encyclicals and statements, and many bishops from around the world issued pastoral statements on this teaching to the faithful in areas in which they serve (Whittington 1994). Among these statements is one that directly addresses the climate crisis—*Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good* (USCCB 2001)—and is included in this collection of essays. As indicated in the essay by Msgr. Charles Murphy and Connie Lasher, Pope Benedict XVI carried into his encyclicals, messages, and statements the principle to care for God’s creation, capping them to the present with his message on the 2010 World Day of Peace, *If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation* (2009c). These magisterial documents show their authors’ grasp of basic scientific facts about the adverse effects that environmental degradation and destruction have had on human life in the past and present. They also recognize scientific projections that point to a more bleak picture for future generations whose well-being cannot be separated from the well-being of other species, ecological systems, and the biosphere of Earth. From this informed perspective, the bishops urge thinking and acting more responsibly toward other constituents of our planet.

Though caring for God’s creation addresses environmental concerns in the interests of humanity now and into the future, other principles of Catholic social teaching can be extended to effectively address anthropogenic causes of climate change. Particularly significant are the subjects of this essay: (1) the *solidarity* of all people because of their

shared human dignity; (2) *subsidiarity* as a process for addressing concerns at incremental levels of governance beginning with the individual; and, (3) *preference for poor and vulnerable people* when making and executing decisions. I begin by exploring these three principles sequentially, providing a brief overview of each in magisterial documents and pointing to the bishops' applications of these principles to environmental concerns. The fourth part focuses on extending each principle in an attempt to more effectively address the climate crisis. Assumed throughout is the basic Catholic understanding that the human person possesses a special dignity in relation to God that should be exemplified in responsible and loving relationships with other persons. Also assumed are basic scientific findings on the effects of human-forced climate change discussed in the introduction and reinforced in other essays of this anthology.

#### SOLIDARITY—SOCIETAL COLLABORATION TO ACHIEVE THE COMMON GOOD

From the patristic period onward, the bishops conveyed their understanding that the faithful should work together to achieve their common good. The identification and explanation of the concept of solidarity by the bishops appeared explicitly in Pope Pius XII's *Summi Pontificatus* as a law rooted in Christian charity that binds humans to collaborate in achieving a mutual good because of their common origin, their rational nature, and the redeeming action of Jesus on the cross (1939, #15, 35, 72). Bringing about and maintaining international peace in human solidarity was a major mutual good to which Pius XII referred at the outbreak of World War II, throughout this war, and during its aftermath (see Doran 1996, 83-84).

Subsequent popes and other bishops continued to use, apply, and enrich the meaning of solidarity when addressing issues pertinent to their times. For example, In *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII identified solidarity as a guiding principle for wealthy nations to address hunger, misery, and poverty in other nations, for materially impoverished nations to work together in addressing their mutual problems, and for establishing workers' unions through which relations between workers and employers can be addressed to their mutual advantage (1961, #23, 157, 190). The bishops of the Second Vatican Council used the concept of solidarity several times in *Gaudium et Spes* to

emphasize the need for the faithful to strive for loving and respectful relationships among themselves as “brothers” and among people throughout the world to achieve the common good of their “universal brotherhood” (1965, #32, 37, 38, 42). Advancing solidarity as a duty especially to the poor, the bishops of Latin America who met in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 attributed the widespread suffering and poverty in their area to the lack of solidarity that was epitomized by the failure to criticize and correct the ongoing injustice, oppression, and “intolerable situation” within which poor people are enmeshed (CELAM 1970, 217).

Pope Paul VI was also concerned about impoverished people and nations. In *Populorum Progressio*, he pointed to the inequities among materially rich and poor nations that thwart achieving peace in the world, expressed the need for all people to have opportunities to develop themselves, and described solidarity as a “duty” that the wealthy are obligated to embrace: “This duty concerns first and foremost the wealthier nations. Their obligations stem from the human and supernatural brotherhood of man, and present a three-fold obligation: (1) mutual solidarity—the aid that the richer nations must give to developing nations; (2) social justice—the rectification of trade relations between strong and weak nations; (3) universal charity—the effort to build a more humane world community, where all can give and receive, and where the progress of some is not bought at the expense of others” (1969, #44). Wealthy nations acting in solidarity with poor nations could achieve “spiritual growth” that, together with economic growth, will “contribute immeasurably to the preservation of world peace” (#73). Identifying solidarity as a call from God, the pope urged the faithful to be alert to God’s calling and to respond through their relations with other persons (#42).

Having reflected on the concept of solidarity before becoming the 265<sup>th</sup> head of the Roman Catholic Church and the onset of the Polish Solidarity Movement, Pope John Paul II reinforced and advanced his predecessors’ teachings in *Redemptor Hominis*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, *Centesimus Annus*, and several World Day of Peace messages (Bilgrien 1999). He stressed solidarity primarily as an attitude and as a moral virtue. As an attitude, solidarity assumes an individual and a group’s recognition of the dignity and rights of human persons that disposes the individual to work cooperatively with others toward the common good of all persons (1987, #38-39). As a moral

virtue, the pope insisted, solidarity should be practiced by individuals and groups with “a firm and persevering determination” to achieve “the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (#38).

Pope Benedict XVI has continued to address solidarity with emphasis on God’s love as a stimulus to the faithful to demonstrate their relatedness to all people as one family in search of its material and spiritual common good. Especially concerned about impoverished people and nations struggling to develop in a globalized economy, he applauded in his encyclical *Deus Caritas est* a growing sense of solidarity among peoples throughout the world that has been fostered by governmental agencies and humanitarian organizations through subsidies, tax relief, and making resources available to people who need them. He expressed his special gratitude to volunteer organizations for their loving service and lauded the participation of young people in these efforts that he interpreted as “a formation in solidarity and in readiness to offer others not simply material aid but their very selves” (2005c, #30). From his perspective, achieving solidarity requires recognizing the interrelatedness and interdependence of humans to one another physically, socially, and economically, working together lovingly and respectfully to develop economically in ways that avoid subordinating the aid-receivers to the aid-givers, and remaining cognizant of the effects that decisions made today will have on future generations (#43).

According to at least two other pontiffs, the human family goes beyond current generations to include future people. The future of humanity concerned Paul VI deeply, especially in light of the deepening rift between rich and poor people and projections of even greater poverty among them in the future. He recognized that each of us has obligations to others not only in the present: “We are the heirs of earlier generations, and we reap benefits from the efforts of our contemporaries; we are under obligation to all men. Therefore we cannot disregard the welfare of those who will come after us to increase the human family. The reality of human solidarity brings us not only benefits but also obligations” (1969, #17). Fretting over the “excessive” and “disordered” consumption of Earth’s “resources” by present generations, John Paul II cautioned the faithful about their “capacity to transform” the world through technology while forgetting that the world is “God’s prior and original gift” of which they cannot make “arbitrary

use." When using God's "gift" of the world today, he continued, the faithful must be conscious of its duties and obligations to future generations (1991a, #37). Benedict XVI underscored Earth as "a precious gift of the Creator" to humans (2009b) and "our common home" from which "future generations have the right to reap its benefits" responsibly as should current generations (2007b). In his 2010 World Day of Peace message, he lamented the misuse of the goods of Earth and encouraged "a greater sense of intergenerational solidarity" so future people are not "saddled with the cost of our use of common environmental resources" (2009c, #8). Studies questioning the availability of food for future generations prompted him in his message on World Food Day to urge governments to provide "adequate funding" that will facilitate "the reactivation of [agricultural] production cycles, despite the deterioration of climatic and environmental conditions" (2010b).

Teachings on solidarity have been issued collectively by other bishops. In *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, solidarity is identified as "a law" linked to charity (1994, #361), "a principle" also articulated in terms of "friendship" or "social charity" (#1939), "a virtue" for spreading spiritual goods and developing temporal goods (#1942, 1948, and 2407), and "a duty" that rich nations have to the poor out of charity and justice (#2439). The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which is comprised predominantly of bishops and cardinals, considers solidarity both as a social principle that stresses the interdependence among individuals and peoples who must avoid perpetrating injustice and as "*an authentic moral virtue*" that is manifested by "*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good*" (2004, 85). All references to solidarity and its precursors in these documents assume the traditional theological understanding that humans are intrinsically social by nature and intended by God to live in cooperative relationships with one another to achieve their mutual good.

Thus, solidarity has a rich heritage in Catholic social teaching by the bishops of the Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> to early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. While the basic idea that the faithful are called to recognize and act in collaboration with all people for their common good regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or any other categories of differences among peoples, the concept of solidarity has been nuanced in magisterial teachings when applied to the particular circumstances the bishops address in the contexts of their times. Solidarity has been categorized variously as a law that binds people together in friendship, a duty to one another

with preference for the poor to achieve the common good, a social principle for recognizing the oneness of all in the journey of life, an attitude that disposes the individual and group to seek the common good, and a moral virtue to be developed in the individual and demonstrated throughout one's lifetime. Yet no one category seems adequate. Drawing from magisterial teachings discussed above, a multi-faceted definition of solidarity is warranted: *The social bond grounded in Christian love that exists within and among persons through awareness of their shared human nature, their interdependence in an increasingly global society, their special obligation to impoverished people and nations, and the moral commitment to strive virtuously to make and execute informed decisions for the common good of all people in the present and the future through dialogue, collaboration, aid to the poor, and service to one another individually and collectively.* Foundational to magisterial teachings about solidarity is the understanding that humans have a unique dignity among creatures as having been made in the "image and likeness" of God (Gen 1:26) and graced with the ability to relate freely, responsibly, and lovingly with one another and to God for their common good and the good of humanity.

In nations all over the world, the term solidarity has been used to call people together for common causes. Among the most well known of these efforts is the Independent and Self-Governing Trade Union *Solidarność* formed in 1980 at the shipyards in Gdańsk, Poland. Other groups that are Catholic-based rely upon the term as exemplified by members of the Society of Jesus who exchange social justice and ecology news, stimulate contacts, and promote networking throughout the world (Jesuit Social Apostolate 2010). The Catholic faithful have been called together in biological regions to address environmental concerns (e.g., Society of Jesus Oregon Province 2006 and Catholic Bishops of the Columbia River Watershed 2005), and they are called together in solidarity to address the climate crisis (e.g., Catholic Coalition on Climate Change 2010 and Caritas International 2010).

The sustainability of the global climate is a major common cause to which people can think about themselves as called by God to respond in solidarity with one another as individuals, groups, and nations. Recognition of human interrelatedness and interdependence is key to responding to this call to seek their mutual good. So also is the obligation of the present generation to future members of the human family so they can inherit a climate that will sustain them. As the United



States Catholic bishops taught in *Global Climate Change*: “Our obligations to the one human family stretch across space and time. They tie us to the poor in our midst and across the globe, as well as to future generations” (USCCB 2001).

### SUBSIDIARITY—AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE FOR MAKING DECISIONS

The principle of subsidiarity is closely linked to magisterial pronouncements about solidarity. Surfacing in the bishops’ teachings as the organizing means through which persons can achieve and exercise solidarity for their common good, the principle of subsidiarity was explicitly taught by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*. In this encyclical, he reinforced and applied for his age of rapid industrial expansion, the entrenchment of large workers unions, class conflicts, and the spread of communism Pope Leo XIII’s prior teaching in *Rerum Novarum* about the roles of laborers, owners of industry, and government. Pius XI was troubled by the diminished role of individuals and small labor associations that had been able to accomplish goals by their own initiative and the increased role of large associations with “unbridled ambition for power” propelled by “greed for [economic] gain” (1931, #109) that assumed decision-making on matters that could be handled at more local levels. This situation was gravely wrong, the pope taught, because it violates the harmonious functioning of an orderly society:

As history abundantly proves, it is true that on account of changed conditions many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations. Still, that most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do (#79).

To help society function in an orderly manner, the pope continued, drawing upon reflections by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.71, secular government must limit its purview to matters it can handle that individuals and smaller associations cannot:

The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of 'subsidiary function,' the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State (#80).

Foundational to his understanding of these roles is a primary commitment to the dignity of human persons who should be free to form associations and to collaborate responsibly with others in making and carrying out decisions that are helpful for their self development as creatures who are striving for their common good. The associations formed do not supplant or subordinate the individual. They are intended to perform tasks that the individual alone cannot. When associations are formed by individuals to perform these tasks, the purview and responsibilities of the individual persist while the individual participates in the associations formed for the common good.

Magisterial teaching on the principle of subsidiarity continued beyond Pius XI's seminal efforts through encyclicals issued by subsequent popes and pastoral statements released by other bishops. For example, in *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII considered the "principle of subsidiary" as the "guiding principle" for the "work of directing, stimulating, co-ordinating, supplying and integrating" (1961, #53) efforts to find "appropriate solutions to the many social problems" of his time (#50). These problems included the lack of opportunity for workers to participate in management and to share in profits (#75, 77, 91), growing intervention by government in the personal lives of individuals and families (#60), and increasing government ownership of property that might reduce private ownership "beyond measure" or completely destroy it (#117). Like Pius XI, John XXIII was clear about the person's role in initiating associations to handle economic and political affairs and participating responsibly in these associations: "[I]n the economic order first place must be given to the personal initiative of private citizens working either as individuals or in association with each other in various ways for the furtherance of common

interests" (#51). He also outlined the tasks that are appropriate for action by higher associations that lower associations cannot accomplish, and he underscored the dictum that these actions should not deprive the individual of his or her freedom to act. These actions by higher associations must "augment" human freedom "while effectively guaranteeing the protection" of the person's "essential personal rights. Among these is a man's right and duty to be primarily responsible for his own upkeep and that of his family" (#55).

During the Second Vatican Council, the bishops endorsed the principle of subsidiarity when discussing economic development. It must remain under human determination, the bishops directed, and not left to a judgment of a few people or nations that are economically and/or politically powerful: "It is necessary...that at every level the largest possible number of people and, when it is a question of international relations, all nations have an active share in directing that development. There is need as well of the coordination and fitting and harmonious combination of the spontaneous efforts of individuals and of free groups with the undertakings of public authorities" (Second Vatican Council 1965, #65). Citizens have the "right and duty...to contribute to the true progress of their own community according to their ability," and to do so freely. Exercising this right and dispensing this duty falls within the "basic rights of individual persons and groups" that should not be obstructed (*ibid.*). However, developing nations, economically advanced nations, and the international community have vital roles to play in the development process when following the principle of subsidiarity. Developing nations should "express and secure the total human fulfilment of their citizens" as the object for progress. Advanced nations should help the developing nations in discharging their responsibilities by respecting their need to support themselves from the income they receive on the sale of their "homemade products." And, "suitable organizations should be set up to foster and regulate international business affairs, particularly with the underdeveloped countries, and to compensate for losses resulting from an excessive inequality of power among the various nations" so the developing nations can "advantageously pursue their own economic advancement" (#86).

Pope John Paul II applied the principle of subsidiarity to the "[m]alfunctions and defects" of the welfare state in an encyclical that he issued to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul attributed welfare state problems to

“an inadequate understanding of the tasks proper to the State” and the failure to respect the principle of subsidiarity. A community of “a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions,” he wrote. Instead, the “higher order” community should support the lower order community when needed and help “coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good (1991a, #48). In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he emphasized the various forms of exploitation and suppression of the individual’s right to develop economically, socially, and politically, especially in the developing countries. The denial or limitation of these rights “diminishes, or in practice absolutely destroys...the creative subjectivity of the citizen” and results in “passivity, dependence and submission to the bureaucratic apparatus” (1988, #15).

Composed predominantly of bishops and cardinals appointed by the pope, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace summarized magisterial teachings on the principle of subsidiarity in *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (PCJP 2004, 81-83). Key to the principle of subsidiarity is promoting the dignity of the human person, and this is impossible “without showing concern for the family, groups, associations, local territorial realities” and other organizations formed to address issues. As the PCJP states, these collectives constitute an “aggregate of economic, social, cultural, sports-oriented, recreational, professional and political expressions to which people spontaneously give life and which make it possible for them to achieve effective social growth (#185, 81). All associations formed to address concerns that cannot be handled by individuals or groups at a more local level should adopt “attitudes of help (*subsidium*)” whereby they assist the local associations through support, promotion, and development without supplanting their “initiative, freedom and responsibility” (#186, 81). Because every person, family, and association makes a unique contribution to the community, the principle of subsidiarity protects them from abuses by associations with greater power so they do not destroy “the spirit of freedom and initiative” of associations they are supposed to help for their common good (#187, 82). When a higher-level authority takes over a function that a lower-level authority or association cannot initiate (e.g., stimulate the economy and redress a serious injustice), this intervention is exceptional and “must not continue any longer than is absolutely necessary” so “the primacy

of the person” is maintained as expressed in society (#188, 82-83). Implicit in the principle of subsidiarity is the duty of citizens to participate freely and responsibly in the cultural, economic, political, and social life of the community to which they belong for the common good (#189, 83).

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI stressed the importance of embracing the principle of subsidiarity to construct “a new order of economic productivity” (2009a, #41). The order he envisions is oriented toward socially responsible human self-development guided by “a dispersed political authority” that operates effectively on different levels of governance and activity (#41), organized to accomplish particular tasks for the common good, and subsidizes others when needed without infringing on their freedom. Key to maintaining these different levels of activity and governance is the inalienable freedom of human persons to actuate themselves, to relate to others for their common good, and to demonstrate charity to others by offering to assist them when they are unable to accomplish tasks on their own (#57). Linking his understanding of solidarity to the principle of subsidiarity, the pope stressed the need for assistance programs at all levels to involve recipients of aid from initiation to completion of the programs (#58) with the aim of seeking the common good (#64) locally to globally. The goods of Earth are a common good of all people, he cautioned, and all nations should “choose the path of dialogue,” cooperate responsibly with one another, and “act in harmony” to “reassess the high levels of consumption” by technologically advanced countries, the hunger for energy by emerging nations, and “the search for alternative sources of energy and for greater energy efficiency” (2007b).

In summation, subsidiarity surfaces in magisterial teachings as a *societal organizing principle through which individual persons freely associate with one another at increasing levels of governance to accomplish a common good that cannot otherwise be achieved*. The principle of subsidiarity assumes the following: (1) Respect for the inherent dignity of the human person is a societal priority; (2) the person is naturally social and only able to become fully himself/herself in solidarity with others; (3) an association formed by persons exist to provide help (*subsidium*) to individuals so they can assume responsibility for their self-fulfillment and relationships with others; (4) an association formed by other associations to address goals that cannot otherwise be accomplished should help those associations so they can assume

responsibility for their efforts; (5) an association formed by other associations does not replace or diminish the work of the forming association; and, (6) intervention of an association into associations or individuals that formed it is only appropriate when helping them help themselves (see Komanchak 1988, 301-2). Thus, from the individual to the highest level of association formed, each has its own purpose, purview, task and authority to address issues that the individual or lower association is incapable of addressing to achieve the good of all (see Doran 1996, 212).

Like the concept and practice of solidarity, the principle of subsidiarity has significance for addressing environment concerns. Humans are not solely individuals. We are social creatures who form and participate in associations to seek our common good at increasing levels of governance—families, neighborhood associations, municipal, town, county, state and federal governments, and regional to international organizations. We depend upon these various levels to achieve goals that one less encompassing association cannot. We can address many environmental issues in our homes and businesses, but environmental problems usually transcend political boundaries and require the cooperation of other people, associations, and governing bodies to address effectively. The principle of subsidiarity can guide people in making and executing decisions at appropriate levels while not absolving individuals, families, and local associations of their responsibilities for decisions they can make and actions they can take to mitigate the effects of human-forced changes in the global climate. While a plethora of examples can attest to collective action at several levels to address problems, the climate crisis presents a challenge where action is needed concurrently at all levels.

### OPTION FOR THE POOR

Admonitions to attend to the poor and vulnerable permeate the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible and the teachings and life of Jesus the Christ depicted in books of the New Testament. Drawing from scriptural texts (e.g., Exodus 22:20-26, Leviticus 19:9-10, Job 34:20-28, Proverbs 31:8-9, Sirach 4:1-10, Isaiah 25:4-5, Isaiah 58:5-7, Matthew 25:34-40, Luke 4:16-21 and 6:20-23, and 1 John 3:17-18), the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church have consistently taught that a basic test of society from a Christian perspective is how its most vulnerable people are faring, and they instruct the faithful to put the

needs of the poor and vulnerable first when making and carrying out decisions individually and in association with others at all levels of governance. The account of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:31-46 serves as a poignant reminder for our having to account to God for how we responded to the poor and vulnerable in our midst and throughout the world (USCCB 2010b). Drawing upon these passages either explicitly or implicitly, the bishops have stressed the need to show preference for the poor, suffering, and vulnerable in our deliberations and actions at all levels of our lives.

### *Showing Preference for Impoverished People*

The imperative that we show preference for impoverished people resounds in so many papal encyclicals and bishops' pastoral statements (USCCB 2010d) that only a few can be mentioned here. In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII stressed the special consideration that should be given for the poor: "[W]hen there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration. The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State" (1891, #37). He was particularly conscious of the conditions in which laborers were working and living as Europe and North America transitioned from an agriculture to an industrial economy.

In *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII urged economically developed countries whose people have an abundance of wealth to help the developing countries whose people are poor and hungry:

Perhaps the most pressing question of our day concerns the relationship between economically advanced commonwealths and those that are in process of development. The former enjoy the conveniences of life; the latter experience dire poverty. Yet, today men are so intimately associated in all parts of the world that they feel, as it were, as if they are members of one and the same household. Therefore, the nations that enjoy a sufficiency and abundance of everything may not overlook the plight of other nations whose citizens experience such domestic problems that they are all but overcome by poverty and hunger, and are not able to enjoy basic human rights (1961, #157).

Suffering people throughout the world prompted the Second Vatican Council bishops to consider the best ways in which the Church should respond. They professed that “God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples” (1965, #69). When using these goods of Earth, the faithful should consider the goods they legitimately possess not only as their own, but also as common insofar as they should be able to benefit not only the individual person but also others. “On the other hand,” the bishops taught, “the right of having a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one’s family belongs to everyone. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church held this opinion, teaching that men are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods [citing Ss. Basil, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bonaventure, and Albert the Great]. If one is in extreme necessity, he has the right to procure for himself what he needs out of the riches of others” (#69). The bishops called upon individuals and governments to aid the many poor in the world so they can help themselves: “Since there are so many people prostrate with hunger in the world, this sacred council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the aphorism of the Fathers, ‘Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him’ [citing Gratian in *Decretum* 21] and really to share and employ their earthly goods, according to the ability of each, especially by supporting individuals or peoples with the aid by which they may be able to help and develop themselves” (#69). As discussed above, helping the poor and vulnerable help themselves is integral to the principle of subsidiarity when propelled by a realistic and spiritually-inspired sense of solidarity.

Continuing to express concern for the poor and vulnerable, Pope Paul VI quoted 1 John 3:17, “He who has the goods of this world and sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how does the love of God abide in him?” in *Populorum Progressio* to teach: “Everyone knows that the Fathers of the Church laid down the duty of the rich toward the poor in no uncertain terms. As St. Ambrose put it: ‘You are not making a gift of what is yours to the poor man, but you are giving him back what is his. You have been appropriating things that are meant to be for the common use of everyone. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich’ (Ambrose 1933, PL 14.747, c. 12, n. 53). These words indicate that the right to private property is not absolute and unconditional” (1967, #23). On the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of



*Rerum Novarum*, Paul VI issued *Octogesima Adveniens* in which he told the more fortunate to give to the less fortunate: “In teaching us charity, the Gospel instructs us in the preferential respect due to the poor and the special situation they have in society: the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others” (1971, #23). He urged “a renewed education in solidarity” in order to develop a “deeper feeling of respect for and service to others” that should lead the faithful to seek the common good of all (#23).

The bishops of the United States expressed their deep concern for the poor in one of the world’s most wealthy nations when issuing a pastoral statement on the economy after an extensive period of study and consultation throughout the country in the 1980s. In *Economic Justice for All*, they identified giving preference for the poor as “the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation” and a moral obligation from a justice perspective (NCCB 1986, #86):

All members of society have a special obligation to the poor and vulnerable. From the Scriptures and church teaching, we learn that the justice of a society is tested by the treatment of the poor. The justice that was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel was measured by how the poor and unprotected—the widow, the orphan, and the stranger—were treated. The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed in his word and ministry excludes no one. Throughout Israel’s history and in early Christianity, the poor are agents of God’s transforming power. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, therefore he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor” (Luke 4:18). This was Jesus’ first public utterance. Jesus takes the side of those most in need. In the Last Judgment, so dramatically described in St. Matthew’s Gospel, we are told that we will be judged according to how we respond to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger. As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental “option for the poor”—to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. This “option for the poor” does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, strengthening the whole community by assisting those who are the most vulnerable. As Christians, we are called to respond to the needs of *all* our brothers and sisters, but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response (NCCB 1986, #16).

Yet the purpose of opting for the poor goes beyond giving them goods to consume, the bishops explained: "The primary purpose of this special commitment to the poor is to enable them to become active participants in the life of society. It is to enable all persons to share in and contribute to the common good.... The 'option for the poor,' therefore, is not an adversarial slogan that pits one group or class against another. Rather it states that the deprivation and powerlessness of the poor wounds the whole community. The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons. These wounds will be healed only by greater solidarity with the poor and among the poor themselves" (NCCB 1986, #88). The needs of the poor take priority over "the desires of the rich," the bishops proclaimed, just as "the rights of workers take priority over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion; the production to meet social needs over production for military purposes" (#94).

Throughout his papacy, Pope John Paul II lamented the plight of the poor amidst the growing wealth of a few and championed the preferential option for the poor as a major Catholic social teaching. Examples of his concern can be found in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: "A consistent theme of Catholic social teaching is the option or love of preference for the poor. Today, this preference has to be expressed in worldwide dimensions, embracing the immense number of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and those without hope" (1987, #42). He appealed to rich nations and people to recognize their moral obligations to impoverished people: "Therefore political leaders, and citizens of rich countries considered as individuals, especially if they are Christians, have the moral obligation, according to the degree of each one's responsibility, to take into consideration, in personal decisions and decisions of government, this relationship of universality, this interdependence which exists between their conduct and the poverty and underdevelopment which exists between their conduct and the poverty of so many millions of people" (#9). In *Centesimus Annus*, he taught that love for others must first be "love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself," and this love "is made concrete in the promotion of justice" (1991a, #58). Many archbishops and bishops have been promoting environmental justice through various programs within their dioceses (e.g., Catholic Diocese of Columbus 2010). Pope Benedict XVI followed his predecessors' concerns for the

poor, emphasizing in *Caritas in Veritate* the love we must have for the poor and vulnerable amidst the rich and powerful: “While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human. God reveals man to himself; reason and faith work hand in hand to demonstrate to us what is good, provided we want to see it; the natural law, in which creative Reason shines forth, reveals our greatness, but also our wretchedness insofar as we fail to recognize the call to moral truth” (2009a, #75).

### *Recognizing the Connection between Environmental Abuse & the Human Poor*

Pope John Paul II linked the plight of the poor and the degradation of the environment in his message celebrating the 1990 World Day of Peace: [T]he earth is ultimately *a common heritage, the fruits of which are for the benefit of all....* It is manifestly unjust that a privileged few should continue to accumulate excess goods, squandering available resources, while masses of people are living in conditions of misery at the very lowest level of subsistence. Today, the dramatic threat of ecological breakdown is teaching us the extent to which greed and selfishness—both individual and collective—are contrary to the order of creation, an order which is characterized by mutual interdependence” (1989, #8). Each person has “a grave responsibility to preserve this order for the well-being of future generations,” he continued, repeating again in this message that “*the ecological crisis is a moral issue*” (#15).

Reflecting on John Paul II 1990 message, the Catholic bishops of the United States issued a pastoral statement entitled *Renewing the Earth* in which they found that “the ecological problem is intimately connected to justice for the poor.” They agreed with the pope that the goods of Earth should be “a common patrimony,” and they shared his concern that these goods run the risk of being monopolized by a few who degrade and sometimes destroy them, “thereby creating a loss for all humanity” (USCCB 1991, 3F quoting John Paul II 1991b). “Poor people are even more vulnerable,” the bishops continued, and they “offer a special test of our solidarity” when addressing environmental problems.

The painful adjustments we have to undertake in our own economies for the sake of the environment must not diminish our sensitivity

to the needs of the poor at home and abroad. The option for the poor embedded in the Gospel and the Church's teaching makes us aware that the poor suffer most directly from environmental decline and have the least access to relief from their suffering. Indigenous peoples die with their forests and grasslands. In Bhopal and Chernobyl, it was the urban poor and working people who suffered the most immediate and intense contamination. Nature will truly enjoy its second spring only when humanity has compassion for its own weakest members (USCCB 1991).

The bishops also addressed the connection between the poor and environmental degradation in *Global Climate Change* as noted above: “[T]he common good requires solidarity with the poor who are often without the resources to face many problems, including the potential impacts of climate change. Our obligations to the one human family stretch across space and time. They tie us to the poor in our midst and across the globe, as well as to future generations. The commandment to love our neighbor invites us to consider the poor and marginalized of other nations as true brothers and sisters who share with us the one table of life intended by God for the enjoyment of all” (USCCB 2001). Following the intentions of this document, the Catholic bishops of the United States are currently engaged in promoting “the needs of the poor and vulnerable at the center of climate legislation” using the argument that “poor people should not bear an undue burden of the impacts of climate change or the global adjustments needed to address it” (USCCB 2010a). Many other bishops around the world individually and collectively within political boundaries and biological regions have issued their reflections of John Paul II’s 1990 message, most of which appeal to the faithful to be cognizant of their actions that can adversely affect the poor and vulnerable in their midst and especially in economically underdeveloped countries (Whittington 2004).

Pope Benedict XVI has advanced thinking about the poor in relation to ecological problems in his World Day of Peace messages, encyclicals, homilies, and various statements issued from the Vatican. Commemorating the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his predecessor’s 1990 World Day of Peace message, Benedict XVI dedicated his message on the 2010 World Day of Peace to addressing the numerous threats to peace and authentic human development posed by misuse of Earth and its natural goods provided by God (2009c, #1). The use of these goods is “a shared responsibility for all humanity, especially the poor and future

generations" (#2, see #8). In *Caritas in Veritate*, he linked the development of people and economies to the natural environment:

Today the subject of development is also closely related to the duties arising from *our relationship to the natural environment*. The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. When nature, including the human being, is viewed as the result of mere chance or evolutionary determinism, our sense of responsibility wanes. In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation. If this vision is lost, we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it. Neither attitude is consonant with the Christian vision of nature as the fruit of God's creation" (2009a, #48).

Recognizing the connection between energy and the natural environment, he shared his concern about obstacles to the economic development of poor countries set by nations, powerful groups, and companies that hoard non-renewable energy sources found within those countries. They lack the means to access these sources and to finance research into alternatives, the pope lamented, so they are exploited and conflicts erupt between and among them. Thus, the international community has "an urgent duty" to develop institutional means through which the exploitation of non-renewable resources can be regulated and poor countries must be involved in the process so all can plan together for the future (#49). Finally, recognizing that the climate crisis is projected to affect the production of food and its availability to the poor in areas already afflicted with food shortages, he urged the international community to be united against hunger, to overcome obstacles of self-interest, and "to make room for a fruitful *gratuitousness*, manifested in international cooperation as an expression of genuine fraternity" (2010b).

Thus, "preferential option for the poor" looms large in Catholic social teaching and is often connected with teachings on the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. The faithful are enjoined to show utmost concern individually and collectively for the poor and vulnerable. Their needs in life must be met, and they must be helped to meet them. Doing so requires those who have more than they need to give

to those who do not and to aim this assistance toward helping the impoverished people help themselves so their dignity as humans is not compromised. Aid to the impoverished is required at incremental levels of governance, following the principle of subsidiarity, when individual and collective help is inadequate. Because the availability of goods to meet the needs of future generations may be compromised by current overuse and abuse, generations to come must be included among the poor and factored into decisions made today.

### EXTENDING CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN RESPONSE TO THE CLIMATE CRISIS

Solidarity, subsidiarity, and preferential option for the poor hold considerable promise for dealing with environmental concerns generally and with the climate crisis specifically. Catholic social teaching about the solidarity of humans can motivate the faithful to care about and for other species, their habitats, the air, the land, and waters for the good of all persons now and in the future. Teachings about subsidiarity provide a hierarchical organizing method for addressing environmental concerns when drawing incrementally upon individuals and associations at various societal levels to protect, ameliorate, and mitigate adverse effects on human persons. Teachings about showing preference for impoverished and vulnerable persons can be effective when making decisions and taking action that protects, aids, and empowers persons who are most severely affected by environmental degradation currently and projected to be adversely affected in the future. Thus, Catholic social teachings in these three categories appear sufficient when focusing on the good of human persons, and much can be accomplished when functioning from this anthropocentric perspective.

However, are these teachings sufficient when they are exclusively centered on the human common good? Are they too centered on valuing the human intrinsically while only valuing other species and biological systems instrumentally for how they can be used to achieve the human common good? Are these teachings sufficiently relevant to the climate crisis when considering the long-term effects on humans, other species, ecological systems, and the biosphere? Are they sufficiently realistic and intellectually honest when recognizing that *Homo sapiens* evolved from and with other species over millions of years on a planet that had its beginning with other planets and solar systems

approximately 14 billion years ago and when acknowledging that humans are radically dependent upon other species, ecological systems, and the biosphere to sustain our lives and efforts to flourish? Are they sufficiently helpful for dealing with a complicated and seemingly intractable global problem caused by many human-induced sources—the climate crisis?

If the answers to these questions are not resoundingly positive as the climate crisis looms, a theological thought experiment is warranted in an attempt to determine if Catholic social teaching about solidarity, subsidiarity, and preferential option for the poor can be more relevant, more realistic, more intellectually honest, and more helpful. Alternatives are to expand solidarity to include other species and ecological systems, to reconfigure the principle of subsidiarity so decision-making and acting is based on biological regions and the biosphere, and to consider endangered species and degraded ecological systems among the poor and impoverished.

### *From the Solidarity of Persons to Earth Solidarity*

The emergence of *Homo sapiens* is well documented by data, reports, and discussions in the scientific literature, incorporated in the newly burgeoning discourse on the relationship between theology and the natural sciences, and popularized by the media. From an initial beginning of the universe, its expansion, the subsequent death of stars that yielded elements essential to life, the formation of billions of galaxies of which at least one had a solar system with a planet within which simple forms of life emerged, and an evolutionary process within Earth that yielded increasingly complex species, ours emerged from earlier Hominoidea with the capacity to talk about and reflect on our place in existence (Schaefer 2009, 165-70). Our physical connection with earlier forms of life is indisputable. As law historian and diplomat Arvid Pardo recalled: “[T]he dark oceans were the womb of life: from the protecting oceans, life emerged. We still bear in our bodies—in our blood, in the salty bitterness of our tears—the marks of this remote past” (1967). Our interconnection with other species in the ecological systems of which we are constituents is also beyond doubt. And, our dependence on other species, the air, land, and water for sustaining our lives is radical. With them, we constitute Earth. We live and function in a biosphere of ecological systems, marginal areas, and myriad plant and animal species. Together, we constitute

the “Earth community,” as moral theologian Larry Rasmussen insists poignantly (1996).

However, the climate crisis suggests that we are not living in solidarity with the other species and abiota that constitute the Earth community. As Pope Benedict XVI noted, “[w]e have usurped” God’s creation, we “want to dominate it,” and we “want unlimited possession of the world” (2005a). In an address to members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences who were commencing a study of the human person, he underscored the fact that humans are “part of nature.” Yet we are distinct. As “free subjects,” he continued, “who have moral and spiritual values,” humans “transcend nature” as creatures who have “a superior dignity and a shared mission toward the whole of creation” (2005b).

How can this shared mission be understood in light of the real and projected effects that humans are forcing on the global climate? How can the “superior dignity” of humans be understood when we are intricately interconnected with other species and abiota, all of whom will be adversely affected now and into the future one way or another? When we are radically dependent on them for the basics they supply that are necessary for our lives and well-being: air to breathe, water to drink, land on which to live, food to eat, shelter in which to live, and myriad other basics? How can we demonstrate our role as part of nature while transcending nature?

We can strive to live in solidarity with all constituents of the Earth community. Living in solidarity with them means choosing to make decisions now for the common good of all species, abiota, ecosystems they constitute, and the biosphere into the future. In light of the ongoing disruption of the global climate, choosing to make decisions for the good of all will require a change in attitude. The change that is required will move beyond the sense of solidarity of all humans that popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have emphasized. Earth solidarity requires a more expansive focus that includes other species, abiota, ecological systems, and the biosphere. Earth solidarity requires a conversion from an anthropocentric attitude that they are merely instruments intended for human use to a planetary attitude that prompts us to intrinsically value other species, the air, the land, waters, ecological systems, and the biosphere within which all function as contributors to and benefactors of a life-sustaining climate.



In addition to a change in attitude from anthropocentric to planetary, recognition of human interconnections with and radical dependence upon other constituents of the Earth community should provide the impetus for demonstrating Earth solidarity as a moral virtue. Developed and practiced consistently by the faithful individually and collectively, solidarity will guide the faithful to think *more intelligently* informed by climate science knowing that the life-supporting climate of Earth is under siege; to make decisions *more prudently* about the possible ways of mitigating human-forced climate change and to make the best possible decisions expeditiously but cautiously in the interest of present and future inhabitants of Earth while remaining vigilant to modifying decisions as new knowledge is discovered; to act *more justly* toward them so they are able to obtain what they need from one another and the abiotic environment to survive, flourish, and contribute to the planetary common good—a life-sustaining climate; to use them *more moderately* knowing that we cannot use them up without adversely affecting the functioning of the global climate; to be *humble* when knowing the cosmological-biological history of our species' emergence from and with other species and abiota and our radical dependence on them for our health and well-being; and to act *boldly and courageously* intelligent, prudent, temperate, and just by facing the facts that we are disrupting the global climate and by persisting in making and implementing decisions geared toward mitigating the real and anticipated effects and adapting to conditions that cannot be mitigated due to our abuses and overuses.

Developing an attitude of solidarity with all other biota and abiota of Earth does not diminish the dignity of the human person. Earth solidarity elevates the dignity of the human and the dignity of human associations. Human dignity is elevated when activating two of the characteristics that distinguish *Homo sapiens*—the capacity to make informed decisions and the will to execute them—and applying these characteristics to address the climate crisis. Though much can be accomplished when making informed decisions in the interests of humans now and in the future, making them in the interests of all constituents of Earth would demonstrate an attitude that recognizes the emergence of our species from and with other species over cosmological and biological time, the human interconnection with them today in light of the mutually experienced effects of changes humans are forcing on the global climate, and the radical dependence humans

have on other species and abiota for the necessities of life and pleasure in living.

What motivates Earth solidarity? Nothing less than love for God and for the Earth community of many varied and interconnected creatures that God loves and calls us to love in solidarity with them (Schaefer 2009, 255-63).

### *From Politically-Defined to Bioregionally-Defined Subsidiarity*

Because subsidiarity has been understood as a societal organizing principle through which individual persons freely associate with one another at increasing levels of governance to facilitate the accomplishment of a common good that cannot otherwise be achieved, decision-making is assumed to occur within human-drawn boundaries at increasingly higher levels (family, neighborhood, municipality, county, state, national and international). However, these political boundaries do not seem appropriate for making decisions about either mitigating changes humans are forcing on the global climate or adapting to them (see O'Brien 2008). The past, current, and projected adverse effects on oceanic coasts, lake basins, river valleys, wetlands, and other ecological systems often cross political boundaries, and each needs to be addressed in its totality as emphasized in scientific and economic reports (e.g., International Bank 2010).<sup>1</sup> Associations for decision-making pertaining to the climate crisis are better centered around biological regions that encompass marginal areas around an ecosystem. From a bioregional perspective, decisions can be made about the most prudent actions to mitigate the adverse effects of human-forced climate change or, if necessary, adapting to changes that cannot be mitigated.

How can the principle of subsidiarity be followed when attempting to mitigate human-forced climate change in a biological region and the greater biosphere? I will attempt to sketch bioregional subsidiarity based on my experience as an environmental group organizer and appointee to several policy positions at various levels of governance.

Because the entire biological region must be addressed, representatives of increasing levels of contact with the region from the most local (e.g., the habitats of species in or on the banks of a river) to more encompassing (e.g., the entire river and banks) to the all-encompassing (e.g., the river basin with additional representation from areas marginal to

1 See also USEPA 2010; IPCC 2007; and Kling 2003.

the ecosystem that may be affected or may affect the region) will identify the actions that need to be taken at their levels where they have the most immediate contact with and control over their actions in relation to the region. The interests of future generations of humans and of other species, habitats, and the ecological systems they constitute will be advocated by representatives who volunteer or are appointed for that purpose. Decisions will be made and actions taken accordingly at those levels to achieve their goals. Persons in association with one another at each level of activity will remain cognizant of its goal, achievements, and shortcomings in relation to the region, prudently alert to the need for modifying actions as new scientific data are compiled and interpreted, and responsible for sharing their findings, decisions, and actions with other levels that are working in solidarity toward mitigating the effects of the climate crisis on the region. If a more local or less encompassing level cannot achieve a goal, help will be provided by the next more encompassing level. All levels will continue to reassess the extent to which their specific goals are being met, share their assessments with other levels culminating in the most encompassing level of the ecological region, and modify their goals to assure that the current circumstances, possible consequences, and scientific projections about present and future effects are considered.

Bioregional subsidiarity will require increasingly encompassing levels of the region to help those that are less encompassing to achieve their mitigation and adaptation goals. Based on climate science data and interpretations, this process will be ongoing for many decades if not centuries in an attempt to recover from the adverse effects human activities are causing today.

Efforts could be made in several bioregional areas of North America. One in particular has considerable potential—the Great Lakes region. Encompassing the mid-central parts of the United States and Canada to their shared eastern coast, this region is the subject of study and recommendations by the International Joint Commission which has been charged by the two governments to address their shared boundary waters. The IJC identified as a “key priority” the mitigation of adverse effects of climate change (Great Lakes Water Quality Board 2003). However, much has yet to be accomplished to produce a plan of action at various physical levels of the bioregion.

Unfortunately for the biological regions that exist within the United States, federal legislation has yet to be enacted to address the climate

crisis. Though hopes were high for passing a comprehensive climate bill during the Obama administration when the Democratic Party dominated both the House of Representatives and the Senate, one had not passed as the Congressional year closed in 2010, and there is little likelihood that climate legislation will be passed during the 2011-13 period with a Republican-based House and a slim majority of Democrats in the Senate.

At this point, hope may be justified in small bioregions. Underway are two efforts with which I am familiar that signify hope for addressing the climate crisis. One effort is among materially poor people in the mountain-enveloped river valley of El Cercado, Dominican Republic. Faith communities organized in “farming associations” consisting of groups of “families” of approximately twenty-five persons are in the process of implementing a plan to mitigate the effects they are experiencing from changes forced on the climate. They are growing organic crops, replanting mango and coffee trees on hillsides made barren of the native mahogany and other trees by multi-national lumber companies and the Trujillo regime, planning to build up the soil sufficiently so native trees can be planted some day, piping clean spring water to their homes so they can adapt to drought, and constructing solar ovens to minimize the carbon output from traditional ways of cooking. Their efforts are motivated by a Christian faith-based discernment process through which they identified problems caused by human-forced climate changes, considered possibilities for addressing them, reflected on these possibilities informed by basic Gospel values and goals, decided on projects to implement, are implementing them, and will be evaluating the outcome in light of basic Gospel values and goals. Another effort is occurring in the mountainous Petén Department of Guatemala where potable water projects drawing on rivers and springs are at various stages of implementation along with sustainable farming, constructing solar bricks, and using them in solar ovens. Hope for future action may also be gleaned from a plan developed by undergraduate students in the Capstone Seminar for the Interdisciplinary Minor in Environmental Ethics at Marquette University who chose to focus on mitigating human-forced climate change through agricultural practices in southeastern Wisconsin (Brunette et al. 2008).

*Preference for All Poor & Vulnerable Members of the Earth Community*

As already explained, the well-expressed Catholic social teaching of opting to give preference for the poor, suffering, and vulnerable means putting poor, suffering, and vulnerable humans first when making and executing decisions. Including the future poor, suffering, and vulnerable humans who will be born into the adversities of changes that human activities are forcing on the climate today is a reasonable extension of this principle. Doing so is a matter of justice because the next generation and generations after will be affected but had no part in forcing these changes, yet some will be more poor, some will suffer more, and all will be vulnerable to these adverse effects to some extent. Thus, present and future poor, suffering, and vulnerable people should be given preference when decisions are made to mitigate the climate crisis and to implement these decisions.

Yet where do the present and future poor, suffering, and vulnerable animal and plant species, ecological systems, and the biosphere fit into this principle? Should their impoverishment, suffering, and vulnerability to the effects of human-forced climate change be ignored? Should accelerated rates of species endangerment and extinction caused by these changes be ignored? When considering the fact that humans are utterly dependent upon other species and abiota that constitute the ecosystems within which we live, separating their well-being from ours is impossible. However, we could continue to view them strictly for their usefulness to us and not intrinsically for their value in themselves and their contributions to the functioning of the ecosystems of which we also are constituents. If we continue to value them instrumentally and not intrinsically, are we not showing our ignorance of our radical dependence upon them, a dependence that should elicit our gratitude to them and to God for making their existence possible? If we continue to value them instrumentally and not intrinsically, are we not also showing our ignorance of the cosmological to biological history out of which humans emerged from and with other species? If we continue to value them instrumentally and not intrinsically, are we not also continuing an anthropocentric mindset that has been so damaging in the past, is damaging in the present, and will be damaging in the future?

If the answer to these questions is “yes,” an extension of the principle to prefer poor, suffering, and vulnerable humans is warranted to include other species, ecological systems, and the biosphere when

making decisions about mitigating the climate crisis and executing these decisions. Extending this principle not only shows that we value other species and systems intrinsically. Extending this principle indicates that we value other species and systems instrumentally for the contributions they make to one another as well as to human-well being. Including them in this principle demonstrates our inseparability from them in this life, our utter dependence on them to continue our lives, and our indisputable interconnections with them in the web of life.

Including other poor, suffering, and vulnerable species, ecological systems, and the biosphere in this long-underscored Catholic social teaching principle does not denigrate the dignity of the human person. Including them *elevates* the dignity of persons by capitalizing upon what distinguishes our species—especially the ability to make informed decisions and the freedom with which to execute them in solidarity with others for our planetary common good—a life-sustaining climate. Including these “new poor,” as theologian Sallie McFague characterizes them altogether as “nature” (1997, 170) brings other species and systems directly into our consciousness and into our deliberations as we struggle to address the disruption of the global climate that our actions are forcing on the Earth community.

## CONCLUSION

Catholic social teachings about solidarity, subsidiarity, and preferential option for the poor focus on human solidarity to achieve the human common good, decision-making at incremental levels of human associations that empower humans to achieve their common good, and opting to prefer the human poor, vulnerable, and suffering when making and implementing decisions. Applying these teachings to the climate crisis yields considerable promise for mitigating the adverse effects of changes humans are forcing on the global climate.

However, as the climate crisis looms in the present, as dire predictions about near and far future effects are issued by climate scientists, and as pleas and proposals to mitigate the adverse effects are ignored, some changes are needed to spark the attention of the faithful to take action at their personal and local levels and to demand action at higher levels of governance. Among the possibilities is extending these teachings so they are more realistic, more intellectually honest, more relevant, and more helpful.

By extending solidarity to include other species, ecosystems, and the biosphere, *Earth solidarity* may be experienced as a planetary bond grounded in Christian love that persons consistently show toward others with whom they share Earth by striving virtuously to make and execute informed decisions for their common good—a life sustaining climate. By extending the principle of subsidiarity so decisions are made at various physical levels encompassed by biological regions, *bioregional subsidiarity* may be experienced as an organizing principle through which individual persons at various levels of the ecological region collaborate with individuals who represent future generations of people, species, abiota, and ecological systems in making and executing informed decisions to mitigate the adverse effects of changes humans are forcing on the global climate today. By extending the teaching of preferential option for poor to include *the future poor, suffering, and vulnerable people, other species, and ecological systems*, their interests will be given preference when making and executing decisions aimed at mitigating the climate crisis. Acting on these extended principles should facilitate addressing the climate crisis effectively.

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