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Article

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CONTINUITY OF EMBODIED ECOLOGY: FROM JOHN PAUL II TO FRANCIS AND POPE LEO XIV

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Abstract

This study shows how the Theology of the Body offers a fundamental framework for modern ecotheology by examining the continuity of Catholic ecological anthropology from John Paul II through Francis to Pope Leo XIV. By examining how papal teaching has incorporated human embodiment, moral responsibility, and care for creation into a cohesive theological trajectory, the study fills a scholarly gap. In terms of methodology, it uses comparative magisterial exegesis, examining important texts such as Francis's *Laudato Si'*, John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope Leo XIV's inaugural Mass for the Care of Creation, and the message of the 2025 World Day of Prayer. These are added to Catholic social teaching and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC 2402–2403) (Leo XIV, 2025a; Leo XIV, 2025b; Leo XIV, 2025c; Francis, 2015; CCC, 1994/1997). Results show that the human body, as the "first environment," establishes a theological need for ecological care; integral ecology becomes a moral and spiritual calling rather than just a policy; and Pope Leo XIV's pastoral and liturgical leadership is a prime example of this ecological vision. The article provides guidance for clergy, laypeople, and Catholic institutions to implement ecological ethics; theologically, it affirms that ecological conversion is inseparable from Christian discipleship. This study highlights the importance of human embodiment in ecological and spiritual responsibility in the twenty-first century, contributing to ecotheology, moral anthropology, and Catholic social thought by tracing a distinct magisterial continuity.

Keywords: Embodied Ecology, Theology of the Body, Integral Ecology, Catholic Ecological Anthropology, Magisterial Continuity, Ecological Conversion.

Introduction

A rich conversation between ecotheology and the Theology of the Body has emerged as a result of Catholic scholarship's growing engagement with the relationship between human embodiment and ecological responsibility. In its broadest sense, ecotheology emphasizes

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humanity's interdependent relationship with nature while examining the theological, ethical, and spiritual aspects of creation care (Bauckham, 2009; McFague, 1993). A profound understanding of human embodiment as a gift, a relational reality, and a reflection of God's creative love is articulated in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* (John Paul II, 1981). Although Catholic scholarship has frequently treated these two areas independently, recent papal teachings emphasize the close connection between ecological responsibility and human corporeality, presenting environmental stewardship as a moral and spiritual necessity (Francis, 2015). The continuity of papal reflection on embodied ecology across successive pontificates is still not well demonstrated, despite this growing recognition. In his writings, John Paul II placed human dignity and ethical obligation within the context of creation, emphasizing the sacramental and relational aspects of the human body (John Paul II, 1981; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994/1997). By promoting an integrated concept of "integral ecology" that considers environmental, social, and human factors, Pope Francis expanded these ideas into the field of ecological ethics (Francis, 2015). According to preliminary observations, Pope Leo XIV is continuing this trend by reaffirming the theological and moral connection between human embodiment and creation care, especially through pastoral initiatives like the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation and the *Borgo Laudato Si'* (Leo XIV, 2025a, 2025b).

The study issue of inadequate scholarly attention to the evolution and continuity of papal ideas on ecological ethics and human embodiment is addressed in this paper. It specifically looks at the ways that theological anthropology and ecological vision are shared by pontificates, highlighting both theological deepening and continuity. The goal of the study is to show how a logical framework for Catholic ecotheology can be obtained by viewing human embodiment as a site of moral and environmental responsibility. The study's three main goals are to: (1) explain the theological underpinnings of embodied ecology in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*; (2) evaluate Pope Francis's contributions to integral ecology and ecological ethics; and (3) place Pope Leo XIV's early interventions within this developing continuum. By providing a framework that connects doctrinal integrity, ethical contemplation, and hands-on involvement with environmental issues, the paper advances current Catholic scholarship in ecotheology, moral anthropology, and social thought. This study is relevant because it addresses the pressing ecological crisis and upholds Catholic doctrine on the sanctity of creation, human dignity, and interpersonal relationships.

Theological Foundations of Embodied Ecology

In Catholic philosophy, the study of human corporeality and moral responsibility for creation are connected through the idea of embodied ecology. This method emphasizes that the human body is a relational, moral, and sacramental reality in addition to being a biological entity, placing ecological concern within a strong theological anthropology. A growing comprehension of the relationship between human embodiment, social ethics, and ecological responsibility is demonstrated by the continuity of papal reflections from John Paul II to Pope Francis and, more recently, Pope Leo XIV.

John Paul II: Theology of the Body and Human Embodiment

Human embodiment is presented as essential to comprehending human dignity, relationality, and moral responsibility in John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* (John Paul II, 1981). The human body, which was made in God's image, is a relational and ethical expression of the individual. Humans participate in creation, exercise moral responsibility, and make the divine plan for human flourishing manifest through their bodies. John Paul II emphasizes in

Familiaris Consortio and his more comprehensive catechesis on the Theology of the Body that relational ethics and bodily integrity are inextricably linked to the larger moral ecology in which humans live (John Paul II, 1981). In this context, human embodiment is implicitly linked to ecological responsibility. The natural environment is a gift from God that needs to be treated with care, just as the body is a gift. Bauckham (2009) contends that the biblical witness in Genesis and the Psalms presents humans as relational agents tasked with preserving and fostering creation. Thus, moral responsibility and human dignity go beyond interpersonal relationships to encompass ecological community care. This is further supported by McFague (1993), who argues that ecological harm frequently represents anthropological misalignment, a discrepancy between how people treat their own bodies and the larger creation. Since the body is a site of relationality, responsibility, and ecological consciousness, John Paul II's Anthropology offers a theological basis for comprehending embodied ecology.

Integral Ecology in Catholic Social Teaching

Using the concept of integral ecology, Pope Francis makes a clear connection between ecological responsibility and human embodiment. He emphasizes in *Laudato Si'* that ecological degradation is inextricably linked to ethical and social upheavals, offering an integrated vision that considers environmental, social, and human aspects (Francis, 2015). Integral ecology places human bodies and their dignity within the larger ecological and social context, building on the principles established by John Paul II. This makes human ecology a part of environmental ethics. The state of the Earth is correlated with the physical, social, and spiritual well-being of humanity. A key idea in this vision is ecological conversion. Pope Francis urges a change in attitudes, behaviors, and institutional policies to combat social injustice, biodiversity loss, and climate change. John Paul II's moral anthropology, which holds that embodiment is a moral and relational obligation toward all of creation rather than just a personal reality, serves as the foundation for the ethical framework. According to scholars like Conradie (2011) and Bauckham (2009), integral ecology is an extension of the theology of human embodiment into ecological praxis as well as a development of traditional Catholic social teaching. In this situation, relational ethics and human dignity become inextricably linked to environmental justice.

Pope Leo XIV: Continuity and Expansion

In his early interventions, Pope Leo XIV advances the theological conversation on embodied ecology while exhibiting continuity with both Francis and John Paul II. Human embodiment, moral responsibility, and ecological ethics are all intertwined in his speeches at the *Borgo Laudato Si'* and World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation. Leo XIV highlights that a theological response based on relational ethics and the dignity of the human body is necessary to address today's ecological crises, which include climate change, deforestation, and environmental degradation. Pope Leo XIV, in contrast to his predecessors, emphasizes pastoral involvement with ecological issues, especially in areas where environmental injustice is present. He contextualizes integral ecology for modern issues while echoing it in his remarks about socioeconomic disparities, urban pollution, and areas impacted by oil extraction (Leo XIV, 2025a, 2025b). This method connects environmental advocacy and human dignity by showing that ecological responsibility is both pastorally applicable and doctrinally based. Furthermore, ecological care is explicitly framed by Pope Leo XIV as a collective and intergenerational responsibility, which resonates with postcolonial and African perspectives that prioritize solidarity, relationality, and restorative justice (Mbembe, 2001;

Sall, 2013). Leo XIV adds to a cogent theological narrative by placing embodied ecology within a continuum of papal reflection: the body is not only the site of moral and personal responsibility but also a participant in the flourishing of creation. By doing this, he presents a modern and convincing framework for Catholic ecotheology that combines ecological praxis, social ethics, and moral anthropology.

Dialogue and Convergence between the Pontificates

A continuity of Catholic thought that places human embodiment, relationality, and ecological responsibility at the center of moral and social teaching is revealed by the discussion and convergence between the pontificates of Pope Leo XIV, Francis, and John Paul II. The understanding of the human person as a relational and ecological agent is profoundly coherent across pontificates, despite the fact that each one arises in a unique historical, cultural, and ecological context. The theological, anthropological, and ecological focuses of these three pontificates are compared in this section, emphasizing their commonalities and distinctiveness.

Comparative Analysis of Papal Reflections

The foundational framework for comprehending human embodiment as essential to moral and social responsibility is found in John Paul II's Theology of the Body. He highlighted that the human body is a gift, relational by nature, and geared toward involvement in God's creation (John Paul II, 1981). Given that humans are called to nurture and preserve creation, the moral significance of embodiment transcends interpersonal ethics and ecological responsibility (Bauckham, 2009; McFague, 1993). According to this framework, the body serves as the foundation for what can be called an "embodied ecology" by acting as a locus of relationality and a mediator of ethical responsibility. By articulating the idea of integral ecology in *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis advances this foundation. Integral ecology emphasizes the interdependence of human, social, and environmental aspects and stresses that human flourishing and the health of the planet are inextricably linked (Francis, 2015). In this sense, human embodiment is closely linked to the well-being of the social and ecological order. By clearly connecting ecological degradation with social injustice, emphasizing the vulnerability of marginalized communities, and advocating for an ecological conversion that changes both individuals and institutions, Francis' ecological vision expands on John Paul II's moral anthropology (Conradie, 2011; Gorman, 2010). Pope Leo XIV carries on and broadens this path by focusing on pastoral engagement and tackling current ecological crises around the world. His remarks on the World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation and his interventions at the *Borgo Laudato Si'* highlight the fact that ecological responsibility is a shared and generational duty (Leo XIV, 2025a, 2025b). Pope Leo XIV places human embodiment in the larger ecological framework, showing that caring for the environment is a moral obligation based on relational ethics and the dignity of the human body. He specifically addresses the socio-political aspects of ecological crises, in contrast to his predecessors, especially in areas impacted by extractive industries, urban pollution, and environmental degradation.

Common Themes across the Pontificates

A number of thematic continuities are revealed by the comparative analysis. First, embodiment is crucial: the human body mediates relationships with God, neighbors, and creation in a theological and ethical way. Second, relationality highlights how interdependent humans are with one another on a social, ecological, and cosmic level. Third, stewardship, or the care of creation, is presented as a moral obligation that incorporates

ecological integrity, social justice, and human dignity. Fourth, integral ecology connects these facets, offering a unified perspective where social, ethical, and environmental issues are intertwined. Pope Leo XIV emphasizes modern applicability, placing ecological responsibility within the realities of the twenty-first century, while Francis places this within ecological praxis and John Paul II supplies the anthropological basis. These pontificates show that while preserving theological coherence, Catholic teaching on ecology is dynamic and responsive to new social, political, and environmental issues.

Methodological Approach

Theological exegesis and magisterial analysis are used in this comparative study. Theological convergence and the development of ecological and embodied concerns are identified through a critical analysis of papal writings, including encyclicals, apostolic letters, speeches, and catechesis. To illustrate the continuity and evolution of ecological theology, the methodology combines teachings from the magisterial tradition with biblical foundations. Application of these insights to global Catholic praxis is further made possible by postcolonial and contextual lenses, which highlight their applicability to communities dealing with environmental degradation, such as those in the Niger Delta, Enugu, Anambra, and Accra.

Implications for Global Catholic Ecological Praxis

There are important ramifications for worldwide Catholic ecological praxis from the convergence of these pontificates. It first creates a theological basis for the connection between environmental stewardship and moral anthropology. Secondly, it offers a structure for pastoral involvement, motivating religious communities to incorporate environmental issues into social outreach, liturgy, and catechesis. Third, it highlights the moral obligation of Catholic organizations, governments, and laypeople to combat environmental deterioration, especially in areas that are at risk. Fourth, it reaffirms the global aspect of Catholic ecological teaching by showing how local issues, like those in Ghana and Nigeria, are closely related to universal theological and ethical precepts. This study provides a logical and useful framework for Catholic ecotheology by emphasizing the continuity and communication between Pope Leo XIV, Francis, and John Paul II. A comprehensive vision that tackles today's ecological issues while staying firmly rooted in Church teaching is formed by the convergence of embodied ecology, relationality, and integral ecology. The knowledge acquired connects theological contemplation with practical ecological responsibility and is immediately applicable to both pastoral practice and academic research.

Embodiment and Creation Care in Practice

A useful framework for dealing with today's ecological issues is offered by the fusion of Catholic ecotheology and Theology of the Body. According to John Paul II, theological anthropology views the human body as a moral and relational agent that allows people to engage with God's creation (John Paul II, 1981). This viewpoint highlights that taking care of creation is a concrete manifestation of embodied responsibility rather than an abstract duty. As relational and physical beings, humans are called to interact with nature in an ethical manner, acknowledging the interconnectedness of ecological systems and the inherent dignity of all living things (Bauckham, 2009; McFague, 1993).

Theology of the Body and Ecological Ethics

Ecological praxis directly benefits from embodiment's moral significance. The ethical obligation to preserve and protect creation is emphasized by John Paul II's emphasis on the

body as a gift and as relational. Environmental deterioration becomes a moral and spiritual issue in addition to a social and scientific one when the human body is viewed as a component of a wider ecological network. Accordingly, ecological sin can be seen as a continuation of anthropological rupture, in which environmental damage reflects a detachment from the relational purpose of the human body (Kärkkäinen, 2014). A useful link between environmental ethics and moral anthropology is provided by Pope Francis' concept of integral ecology in *Laudato Si'*. Human dignity, social justice, and environmental stewardship are all directly linked by integral ecology (Francis, 2015). By highlighting solidarity with the marginalized, who are frequently the ones most impacted by ecological crises, it challenges both clergy and laypeople to view environmental harm as inextricably linked to human well-being (Conradie, 2011). By emphasizing pastoral involvement and institutional accountability and encouraging Catholic communities to act through advocacy and example, Pope Leo XIV further solidifies this vision (Leo XIV, 2025a; 2025b).

Practical Applications for Clergy, Laity, and Institutions

There are many real-world, context-sensitive uses for embodied ecology. Clergy can integrate ecological ethics into their homilies, catechesis, and sacramental life to highlight that stewardship of creation is a moral duty consistent with the Gospel and Church teaching. As part of faith formation initiatives, parishes and diocesan programs can incorporate environmental education based on the Theology of the Body, which emphasizes human embodiment, relationality, and intergenerational responsibility. Laity involvement can take many different forms, such as supporting sustainable development policies, organizing waste management initiatives, and planting trees under community leadership. Catholic lay movements have coordinated cleanup efforts, pushed for corporate responsibility, and collaborated with global environmental networks in areas like the Niger Delta, where oil spills have wreaked havoc on ecosystems and local livelihoods (Alabi, 2024). The moral and spiritual discourse of creation care is also increasingly being used to frame green urban initiatives and air pollution monitoring in urban centers like Enugu (Ejikeme, Adogu, & Onwuzuligbo, 2023). River basin restoration initiatives in Anambra demonstrate a dedication to social and environmental justice, mirroring Francis' integral ecology and John Paul II's relational anthropology (Roberts, Anikwe, & Njideka, 2025). Schools, colleges, and religious institutions that are Catholic are especially well-positioned to adopt systemic ecological practices. Initiatives can include developing energy-efficient infrastructure, ethical investment policies, and incorporating sustainability into curricula. A generation of morally conscious graduates who see ecological care as an extension of their embodied vocation is being fostered by Catholic universities in Accra and southern Nigeria, for instance, which have started integrating environmental stewardship into their theological and social science curricula (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015; Geyer, 2008).

Case Examples: Church Initiatives in Environmental Sustainability

The practical convergence of ecotheology and theology of the body is demonstrated by a number of case studies. Diocesan initiatives in collaboration with local communities in the Niger Delta have integrated spiritual development and environmental advocacy, tying liturgical life to ecological consciousness (Watts, 2009). The Catholic Diocese of Enugu has demonstrated the practical application of ethical responsibility by supporting green parish initiatives, such as community gardens and renewable energy projects (Ejikeme, Adogu, & Onwuzuligbo, 2023). Catholic schools in Accra have launched educational initiatives on waste reduction and biodiversity, involving students in practical environmental work and

portraying these endeavors as manifestations of moral and spiritual stewardship (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015).

These projects serve as prime examples of how embodied ecology can transcend academic discussion and become a transformative practice. Catholic communities can address environmental degradation while promoting social justice and spiritual development by highlighting the relational and ethical aspects of human embodiment. By tying together the ethical, social, and ecological facets of Catholic life, the Theology of the Body and Francis and Leo XIV's ecological vision offer a logical foundation for comprehensive action. Ecotheology's practical application of Theology of the Body emphasizes how ecological responsibility and human embodiment are inextricably linked. Informed by papal teaching and sensitive to regional ecological issues, clergy, laity, and institutions are called to foster an ethics of relational stewardship. Projects in the Niger Delta, Enugu, Anambra, and Accra show how Catholic communities can embody a faith that respects God and creation by converting theological insights into sustainable action. In addition to providing a model for international ecclesial engagement with urgent environmental issues, this convergence of embodiment, relationality, and ecological ethics validates the continuity of Catholic teaching from John Paul II to Francis and Pope Leo XIV.

Critical Reflections and Contemporary Relevance

Although they offer a convincing vision of embodied ecology, the teachings of Popes John Paul II, Francis, and Leo XIV are not impervious to criticism. The accessibility and relevance of these lessons in environments characterized by poverty, ecological injustice, and postcolonial legacies have drawn criticism from academics. Communities in the Niger Delta, where environmental degradation brought on by oil has resulted in significant social, economic, and health challenges, may find the theological discourse on human embodiment and integral ecology abstract or distant (Alabi, 2024). Similar to this, urban areas like Accra and Enugu deal with complicated environmental problems like waste management, air pollution, and industrial encroachment, which call for pragmatic, situation-specific methods of ecological care (Ejikeme, Adogu, & Onwuzuligbo, 2023; Asamoah-Gyadu, 2015).

Papal reflections can be contextualized and enhanced by using the critical lens provided by African ecotheology. By emphasizing relationality and interdependence, the communitarian ethic of "I am because we are" extends stewardship to non-human creation as well as human communities (Mbiti, 1970). This viewpoint emphasizes that ecological care is a moral and spiritual obligation ingrained in human embodiment and communal life when combined with the Theology of the Body. Additionally, postcolonial critique emphasizes how historical patterns of extraction, marginalization, and governance failures are inextricably linked to environmental degradation in areas such as the Niger Delta and Anambra (Mbembe, 2001; Sall, 2013). These observations emphasize the need for communication with local realities, cultures, and ecological practices while warning against the universalization of papal teaching. This integration pushes Catholic communities to take a more comprehensive approach to creation care from an ethical standpoint. Integral ecology, relationality, and embodiment all call for the following useful interventions: community-based ecological projects, environmental advocacy, and sustainable resource use. For clergy, this means incorporating ecological issues into pastoral initiatives, sacramental life, and sermons. It encourages lay involvement in initiatives like school-based environmental programs in Accra, reforestation and cleanup campaigns in the Niger Delta, and river basin restoration in Anambra. Universities, parishes, and dioceses are examples of Catholic

institutions that can act as centers for environmental sustainability education, policy engagement, and moral leadership.

Embodied ecology is still relevant today because it can bring social justice, environmental ethics, and moral anthropology together. This method affirms that creation care is a spiritual vocation rooted in human embodiment rather than just an ethical or scientific requirement by bridging Theology of the Body, Integral Ecology, and African eco-spirituality. It gives local and international Catholic communities the theological depth and practical effectiveness they need to address the ecological crises of the twenty-first century. Contextualized through African and postcolonial lenses, the convergence of these papal teachings provides a model for a resilient, morally active, and environmentally conscious Catholic praxis that is instructive both locally and globally.

Conclusion

Examining the continuity of embodied ecology under Popes Francis, Leo XIV, and John Paul II, this study has demonstrated the close connection between Catholic ecological teaching and the Theology of the Body. A consistent, morally sound approach to creation care is based on an understanding of human embodiment, relationality, and moral responsibility, as demonstrated by a close examination of papal writings, encyclicals, and magisterial speeches. The anthropological basis is found in John Paul II's Theology of the Body, which presents the human being as a relational and sacramental reality whose dignity and stewardship transcend the self to include the ecological community (John Paul II, 1995). According to this theological perspective, protecting the environment is an essential part of human vocation rather than an elective concern. This vision is expanded upon in Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which emphasizes integral ecology, the interconnectedness of creation, the moral need to address climate change, and environmental injustice while tying human ecology to the larger ecological crisis. Francis encourages ecological conversion as a manifestation of moral and spiritual responsibility in both local and global communities. His teachings have a practical and pastoral bent. African ecotheology, which places a strong emphasis on relational ethics, community solidarity, and harmony with non-human creation, is highly compatible with this strategy (Mbiti, 1970). It is clear that embodied ecology needs to be viewed through a socio-environmental and postcolonial lens when placing papal teachings within the environmental realities of Accra, Enugu, Anambra, and the Niger Delta. Theological responses that incorporate the spiritual and practical aspects of ecological stewardship are necessary to address problems like oil pollution, industrial contamination, and urban environmental degradation. Building on these foundations, Pope Leo XIV's magisterial contributions strengthen the embodied ecology's moral, ethical, and pastoral continuity. Despite being a modern pontificate, his teachings which follow a logical line from John Paul II and Francis emphasize relationality, human dignity, and the necessity of ecological responsibility. Pope Leo XIV makes sure that the Church's ecological vision is dynamic, responsive, and pastorally relevant by tackling today's environmental crises with moral clarity and theological insight. These three pontificates' convergence shows that the Church's ecological teaching is a cohesive tradition based on the anthropology of the body and the ethics of creation care, rather than being disjointed or episodic.

The results of this study have important ramifications for both practical ecclesial engagement and theological scholarship. This continuity emphasizes to academics the value of combining ecological ethics, social teaching, and moral anthropology when studying Catholic theology. A deeper understanding of creation care as a theological and ethical

necessity is fostered by its encouragement of interdisciplinary research that draws from ecological science, African eco-spirituality, biblical exegesis, and postcolonial critique. The study offers a framework for integrating ecological praxis into preaching, education, sacramental life, and community involvement for clergy and laypeople. Theology of the Body can guide practical action, as demonstrated by examples like reforestation campaigns, cleanup efforts, and support for sustainable resource management. This makes ecological stewardship a lived expression of faith. Human embodiment, relationality, and moral responsibility are all inextricably linked to ecological care, as demonstrated by the persistence of embodied ecology throughout these pontificates. This study offers a coherent, globally relevant, and locally applicable model of Catholic ecological praxis by combining the theological contributions of Pope Leo XIV, Francis, and John Paul II. It exhorts academics, pastoral leaders, and communities to adopt an integrated approach to creation care that is devoted to the flourishing of all creation, true to Church teaching, and cognizant of socio-environmental realities. In order to keep Catholic ecological ethics both intellectually sound and pastorally transformative, future research should keep investigating localized applications of embodied ecology, especially in areas with severe environmental challenges.

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