

## **"Stewards of Our Bodies: Responsible Parenthood and the Spirituality of Stewardship"**

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In the first sentence of his recent Encyclical, *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis writes: "In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us." The image of "our common home" may be deceptively simple. The Greek word for "house" is "*oikos*", and this is the root of three very important English words: ecology, economy, and ecumenism. The Holy Father weaves together the need to respond to the environmental crisis, the economic inequities that create an ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and the underlying spiritual hunger felt by so many today.

### **The Principle of Human Ecology**

At the very outset of the Encyclical Pope Francis quotes Pope Benedict XVI to underscore how important it is for us to take a holistic approach when addressing the environment:

My predecessor Benedict XVI ... observed that the world cannot be analyzed by isolating only one of its aspects, since 'the book of nature is one and indivisible', and includes the environment, life, sexuality, the family, social relations, and so forth. It follows that 'the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence'. Pope Benedict asked us to recognize that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behaviour. The social environment has also suffered damage. Both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless. We have forgotten that 'man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself. He is spirit and will, but also nature'. With paternal concern, Benedict urged us to realize that creation is harmed 'where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves' [LS, 6].

This, however, is not the first time Pope Francis spoke of the connection between the natural environment and the social environment. Last November, in his address to the participants at the International Colloquium on the Complementarity between Man and Woman sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican, he spoke quite emphatically about this with the following words:

Marriage and the family are in crisis today. We now live in a culture of the temporary, in which more and more people reject marriage as a public obligation. This revolution of customs and morals has often waved 'the flag of

freedom', but it has, in reality, brought spiritual and material devastation to countless human beings, especially the poorest and most vulnerable. It is ever more evident that the decline of the culture of marriage is associated with increased poverty and a host of other social ills that disproportionately affect women, children and the elderly. It is always they who suffer the most in this crisis.

The crisis of the family has produced a human ecological crisis, for social environments, like natural environments, need protection. Although humanity has come to understand the need to address the conditions that threaten our natural environment, we have been slow — we have been slow in our culture, even in our Catholic culture — we have been slow to recognize that even our social environments are at risk. It is therefore essential that we foster a new human ecology and make it move forward [n. 2].

A “new human ecology”: that is, the principle according to which all of the different spheres of our existence are interrelated – the physical, the spiritual, the social, and so forth.

This is a point we can immediately understand at the level of the physical environment. A river that's polluted in one country will be polluted in its neighboring country. The bad air quality in one city will affect the communities surrounding it. We can also certainly understand its application to the economy. If there could ever be any doubt about that, the global economic crisis that hit in 2008, and that we are still working ourselves out of, has done away with that. But this is a basic operating principle of all of life and therefore one which applies at all other levels as well: at the level of physical health where the various systems of the body are all interconnected; at the levels of spiritual and moral health, which in turn affect the quality of our human relationships and even economic health. That is, all of these levels are furthermore interconnected among themselves. They all affect each other. And so the truth of human ecology constitutes an integrated vision of the human person: both body *and* soul, both intellect *and* will.

Pope Francis' reference to his predecessor came from Pope Benedict's Encyclical on Catholic Social Teaching, *Caritas in Veritate*, in which he elaborates on this teaching of human ecology. He echoes this view of interconnectedness where he speaks about the intimate and unbreakable relationship between the proper moral outlook of society and its ability to respect human nature. He writes:

In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that

future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society [CV 51].

Pope Francis has been an ardent teacher in continuing to call our attention to this important principle in life. He picks up on this theme later on in *Laudato si'*, where he criticizes what he calls a “misguided anthropocentrism”. He warned that this leads to a misguided lifestyle:

When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence we should not be surprised to find, in conjunction with the omnipresent technocratic paradigm and the cult of unlimited human power, the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests. There is a logic in all this whereby different attitudes can feed on one another, leading to environmental degradation and social decay [LS, 122].

It all ultimately gets down to a spiritual disease. We really have to look at what is deepest and most intimate about us, because that will affect everything else. If there is disorder there, all else will be disordered; if there is proper ordering there at the spiritual level, then there is a much better chance that all else will be properly ordered as well, thus creating the conditions for true human flourishing, both of individuals and of society as a whole. Which takes us back to the beginning, and the theme of our conference: “Male and Female He Created Them”.

## **Responsible Parenthood**

The title comes from Genesis 1:27: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; *male and female He created them.*” This is the pattern that God stamped into creation at the very beginning, and is the basis for the spirituality of what the Church refers to as “responsible parenthood”. I myself first became aware of and interested in the Church’s teaching in the area of responsible parenthood when I first entered the seminary back in the 1970’s. While the basics of this teaching always made sense to me, it all really hit home when I was privileged to attend a talk by the Billings. Although the term had not yet been coined in Papal teaching, the principle of human ecology became abundantly clear to me at that time, and I understood how the Church’s teaching is confirmed by biology, how it is all oriented toward creating new life, and nurturing that new life once conceived and then after birth.

The experience of our society ever since then has only confirmed for me the wisdom of the Church all the more, and the interconnectedness of all of these dimensions of life. We see all around us the consequences of the demise of our understanding of the correct ordering of society and of the human person in these areas. We see it in attacks on the sanctity of human life, in so many different ways. We see it in the social costs of family fragmentation. Indeed, we have known for decades the dire consequences specifically of fatherlessness: increased rates of incarceration, youth violence, teen pregnancy, failure in education, ... and the list goes on.

That's certainly bad news. I've heard it said that before people are open to the good news, they have to know the bad news. But we have good news, we have the antidote to these social woes: the spirituality of responsible parenthood.

I will take as the basis for this teaching a book entitled *Love and Responsibility*, written back in 1960 by the then-Archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla. As many of you know, this book served as the blueprint for what later would be called the "Theology of the Body," an extensive teaching he developed as Pope John Paul II during his Wednesday General Audiences from September 5, 1979 to November 28, 1984.

In this groundbreaking work, John Paul speaks about two different ways of understanding the human person. He begins, though, by speaking about the moral imperative, which he gets from the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Emmanuel Kant, who was a great influence on his own philosophical thinking. Kant says, "The moral imperative is to act always in such a way that the other person is the end and not merely the instrument of your actions." He then critiques the philosophy of utilitarianism, obviously meaning to use or to take advantage of. Utilitarianism extols what is useful – which means, whatever gives pleasure – and excludes the opposite. So the premise of the philosophy of utilitarianism is to be happy, to live pleasurably. So herein, the Pope says, lies the problem: "If pleasure is only or at least the main good, and therefore the whole basis of moral norms in human behavior", then, he says, "[e]verything we do must of course be looked at as a means towards this one good, this single end. Hence the human person, my own or any other and every person, must figure in this role as a means to an end, the end being pleasure." Now, by "pleasure" here he means not only pleasure in the sense of physical sensation. There are other types of pleasure as well, that is to say, pleasure in the sense of whatever gives delight – intellectually, aesthetically, and so forth. But, he says, this is a special threat in the sphere of sexual relations. He states:

The great danger lies in the fact that starting from the utilitarian premises it is not clear how the cohabitation or association of people of different sex can be put on a plane of real love, and so freed from the dangers of 'using' a person ... and of treating a person as the means to an end. Utilitarianism seems to be a program of thoroughgoing egoism quite incapable of evolving into authentic altruism.

He then speaks about what he calls the "gospel norm", or the "personalistic norm". This is the New Testament commandment of love. He says that love towards a person is

implicitly opposed to the principle of utilitarianism, which can never arrive at real love. The personalistic norm establishes an objective criterion that is not dependent upon my subjective whims. The personalistic norm, in its negative formulation, is: “the person is the kind of good which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such the means to an end.” The positive formulation puts it this way: “the person is a good towards which the only proper and adequate attitude is love. This positive content of the personalistic norm is precisely what the commandment to love teaches.” And so he says, “Only love can preclude the use of one person by another. Love is conditioned by the common attitude of people towards the same good which they choose as their aim and to which they subordinate themselves. Marriage is one of the most important areas where this principle is put into practice.”

In order, then, to exclude the spouses from using each other, or one using the other, they must have a common end. And this end, he says, “is procreation, the future generation, a family, and, at the same time, the continual ripening of the relationship between two people, in all the areas of activity which conjugal life includes”. He is alluding here to the two ends of marriage: the procreation and upbringing of offspring, and the mutual good of the spouses; procreation and unity. Clearly, by its very nature, by just looking at the physical act, that is what conjugal love is for. And that’s why the Church understands these to be the two ends of marriage: to bring men and women together to produce and educate the next generation of citizens.

The problem is that people do not understand what love means anymore. Love is understood nowadays in a purely subjective sense. This then makes it all the more difficult for people to understand – even fundamentally – what marriage is about. This was already emphasized by Pope Pius XII, back in the years after the Second World War, who realized back then how contemporary culture was eroding these values. And it was repeated again in *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council.

Not surprisingly, then, John Paul treats, at length, the understanding of love in *Love and Responsibility*, and speaks about how love always involves the mutual relationship between persons. As applied to a man and a woman, he talks about a three-fold distinction.

The first type of love he calls, “love as attraction”. To experience attraction to another person is to regard that person as a good. But that attraction doesn’t involve just the intellect, it’s a matter also of the will. The emotions play a great part in “love as attraction”, but for love to happen, reason has to play a role as well. Love cannot happen if it is a purely emotional reaction because emotional reactions are fleeting and, of themselves, are not based on the truth of the other person, but rather on an emotional experience which will eventually pass away. And if that’s all there is to it, it will leave the other person empty. Therefore, there must be a direct attraction to the person as such, not simply to the qualities of the person but valuing the person as a person, not as a means to an end. Human beings are spiritual beings; they have an inner life. So they must necessarily be attracted to the inner as well as the outer

beauty. This is why he can say, "Attraction is of the essence of love and in some sense is indeed love, although love is not merely attraction." This is not the sort of love that can be subject to a commandment; rather, it's the sort of love that happens spontaneously. There *is* such a love that can be subject to a commandment. After all, our Lord commands us to love our enemies. That is the love of *agape*.

Also of the essence of love, he says, is "love as desire", that is, the second level or dimension of love that he speaks about. He says love as desire results from our natural limitation and insufficiency as human beings. We are naturally limited because, as human beings, we can exist only as man or as woman. Our sex, then, is a limitation. Therefore, the man and the woman need each other in order to complete their own being. And this need for completion, he says, makes itself felt through the sexual urge. It is because of this that love as desire, more than any other kind, runs the risk of degenerating into operating out of the utilitarian mode. One does not need to be a brilliant philosopher or world-renowned psychologist to realize that if desire predominates in the relationship, it can deform the love between a man and a woman and rob them of it.

Still, just because the other person satisfies the basic need one has at the level of one's being, this does not necessarily mean that the person is being used as a means to an end. True love of desire looks to the person as a person based on the personalistic norm. John Paul is speaking here, then, about how these levels of love grow and deepen. These first levels are more easily hijacked by the utilitarian mentality, but they aren't necessarily, in and of themselves, attached to it. They can be lived out of the proper understanding of the human person and affirming of the other's dignity.

Then, finally, the third level of love is "love as goodwill". Love as desire is not complete because it is longing for the other person as a good for one's self. That's not enough. Over time, this must develop into a longing for the other person's good. This is love as goodwill, the same thing as selflessness in love, and "the closest we can come to the pure essence of love". Then he has a key phrase: "Such love does more than any other to perfect the person who experiences it." That's the whole point of love, and specifically here he's talking about marital love: to perfect the person who loves. The more we are focused on the other, the more we live for the other, the more we will perfect ourselves. This is the essence of love. Then he speaks about the principle of reciprocity: when this happens, the two "I's" become one "we". The couple's relationship has a certain identity or dynamic, it's more than just the two of them together. We speak about that dynamic as "synergy", that is, "the whole is greater than the sum of the parts". Such love in a couple requires a limitation on one's freedom, at least in the sense that freedom is popularly understood, that is, as the faculty to do whatever I want. In this sense, freedom would necessarily be limited because this kind of love is a giving of one's self; thus, it means that I'm limiting my freedom for the good of the other. He says that this "might seem to be something negative and unpleasant, but love makes it a positive, joyful and creative thing". And then another key phrase: "Freedom exists for the sake of love." That is why God gave us freedom: to use it for love.

Here, then, is the contrast. On the one hand, if each one brings only – or at least mainly – desire to the relationship, what happens? The aim is to seek pleasure, and so each is using the other. As he says:

[M]ere pleasure, mere sensual enjoyment is not a good which binds and unites people for long ... A woman and a man, if their 'mutual love' depends merely on pleasure or self-interest, will be tied to each other just as long as they remain a source of pleasure or profit for each other. The moment this comes to an end, the real reason for their 'love' will also end, the illusion of reciprocity will burst like a bubble.

Then he says something that is really quite self-evident, when you think about it: "It is impossible to put your trust in another human being, knowing or feeling that his or her sole aim is utility or pleasure." People can trick themselves into thinking that's not what's happening, but on a deep level, inevitably it is.

Now contrast this with the couple living at the level of love as goodwill. Here is true reciprocity, a synthesis of love as desire and love as goodwill. He says, "To be able to rely on another person, to think of that person as a friend who will never prove false, is for the person who loves a source of peace and joy. *Peace and joy are fruits of love very closely bound up with its very essence*" (emphasis added). Peace and joy – sure signs of true love. And, I would add something more here: security. Security is also a sign of true love – to be able to trust someone at that depth, and to know that you can always rely on the other. Think about it: who is truly free? The couple living primarily out of that idea of love as desire, where the aim is to seek pleasure? They're always going to be wondering about the other. "Am I satisfying that person?" "Is my spouse going to be looking for pleasure somewhere else?" Each is second-guessing the other. But then think of the couple that sacrifices their personal freedom for the good of the other, and is secure in the assurance that they can always rely on the other and the other will never betray them. Who, really, is "free" in this scenario?

Love as goodwill is at the heart of responsible parenthood, a spirituality which is embraced and lived out very concretely, bodily, in Natural Family Planning. Again, human ecology: it's healthy physically, and so it's healthy in all other ways for the couple – emotionally, socially, spiritually, morally. Perhaps most indicative of all is how low the divorce rate is among those couples who practice Natural Family Planning: below 2%. Imagine a world with a divorce rate of 2%! For those of you involved in any form of ministry in the Church, imagine how much easier your life would be, no matter what your ministry is, if 98% of the people you work with and minister to came from intact, strong, united families.

This thought indicates how the positive effects of responsible parenthood go beyond just the couple themselves. We are all interconnected. We are all our brother's keeper, as Pope John Paul II reminds us in *Evangelium Vitae*. There is abundant social science research, for example, pointing to the devastating effects that widespread family

breakdown has on the economy. Strong, intact families make for a strong, intact society.

So you see, it all fits together: respect for God's plan for marriage leads to a greater respect for life; living that plan cannot but engender a love for God, and therefore a desire for God and for friendship with Christ; friendship with Christ naturally leads one to seek incorporation as a member of Christ's Body, the Church. If a couple is living God's plan for their marriage – right at the deepest, most intimate level – they cannot help but be Christ-centered. Responsible parenthood is antithetical to selfishness.

This, then, is not just a technique, another method of avoiding (or attaining) pregnancy, with its own advantages and disadvantages. For those couples “who, for serious reasons and with due respect to moral precepts, decide not to have additional children for either a certain or an indefinite period of time” (*Humanae Vitae*, 10), NFP is a part – an essential part – of responsible parenthood, for responsible parenthood is a whole spirituality of marriage.

- It's a spirituality of *openness*, openness to life, and therefore, openness to God.
- It's a spirituality of *communion*, communion in the sense of that communication that takes place at the deepest level of the relationship, communication facilitated by NFP because it keeps the couple in touch with that deepest level of their relationship.
- It's a spirituality of *perseverance*, working at keeping one's marriage strong, living by that old adage that “if you want your marriage to work, you have to work at your marriage”.
- It's a spirituality of *confidence*, confidence in the truth as revealed by Christ and taught by the Church. The teaching of the Church is nothing to be embarrassed about. On the contrary, this is the truth! As Archbishop Chaput once said in a pastoral letter when he was the Archbishop of Denver, “To be embarrassed by Church teaching is to be embarrassed by Christ's teaching.” And what is the result? He says, “The irony is that the people who dismissed Church teaching in the 1960's soon discovered that they had subverted their own ability to pass anything along to their children.” Ultimately, life ends up empty and meaningless.
- It's a spirituality of *generosity*, generosity towards each other, towards the family, towards the community and the Church. It is, therefore, a spirituality of, yes, stewardship – of giving of time, talent and treasure. The experience of parish priests who have promoted NFP in their parishes is that the NFP couples are among the most generous tithers in their parish.

## **The Spirituality of Stewardship**

Everything that I've been saying up until now really reflects that one Bible verse so intensely packed with meaning which I cited at the outset: Genesis 1:27, which tells us that God created man and woman in His image and likeness, “male and female He created them.” So that's the verse that gets us into responsible parenthood. But there is more to the creation story; there's what the Bible tells us in the next verse. Genesis

1:28 says that God commanded the couple, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”. In other words, God gave the human race *stewardship* over all creation. That next verse in the creation story gets us deeply into the spirituality of stewardship. And so this principle, too, is stamped into the pattern of creation from the very beginning.

In their pastoral letter, *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*, the U.S. bishops teach that the world “remains a kind of garden or workshop entrusted to the care of men and women for God’s glory and the service of humankind”. We have here, then, the beginning of the Christian vocation, to collaborate with God in the work of creation – the first chapter of Genesis – and in the work of redemption – the third chapter of Genesis, the fall and then the promise of redemption. Stewardship, then, sees all of creation as a gift. The Christian vocation is fulfilled by returning to God, with increase, all that He has given us. As *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response* says,

All temporal and spiritual goods are created by and come from God. That is true of everything human beings have: spiritual gifts like faith, hope and love; talents of body and brain; cherished relationships with family and friends; material goods; the achievements of human genius and skill, the world itself. One day God will require an accounting of the use each person has made of the particular portion of these goods entrusted to him or her.

Marriage is a school of self-perfection. That really means accepting the reality of our bodily-ness, accepting our sexuality as a gift from God, and living accordingly. Stewardship is, likewise, a school of self-perfection with regard to our relationship with the passing material things of this world, using them in a way that has consequences for our eternity, as gifts from God to be used for His glory and to help us work out our salvation. We speak of these gifts as time, talent and treasure to focus our attention concretely on this good. God has given everyone some degree of all three of these. They have to be lived out specifically in the context of our vocation in some way or another.

This does place demands on us. *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response* speaks about the concept of cheap grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulated in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He was the Lutheran pastor involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler and was arrested and eventually executed for it, so he knows what he is talking about. “Costly grace is costly,” the bishops tell us, “because it requires a disciple for Jesus’ sake to put aside the craving for domination, possession, and control, and grace because it confers true liberation and eternal life. It is costly, finally, because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.” This is the imitation of Christ in his self-emptying. We can see how this applies equally to both that whole reality of responsible parenthood and God creating us male and female, as it does here with regard to stewardship. Yes, this spirituality places demands upon us, but not in a masochistic way. Quite the contrary! As the bishops say,

To be a Christian disciple is a rewarding way of life, a way of companionship with Jesus, and the practice of stewardship as a part of it is itself a source of deep joy. Those who live this way are happy people who have found the meaning and purpose of living.

They are happy because they are grateful. Stewardship essentially is a spirituality of gratitude. How can one cooperate with God's gifts if one is not grateful for them? That happiness begins already here and now, because living this way creates within us the capacity for heaven because it creates within us the capacity for love. This is the personalistic norm applied to our relationship to the material things of this world – to use them in a way that has positive consequences for our eternity, to use them in a way that makes us capable of love and therefore capable of Heaven.

This is certainly not a message we hear in our contemporary culture. Rather, the message we most often hear is that the purpose of life is to live for me – “It's all for me!” – not for others. This draws our attention to the parts of the Holy Father's Encyclical that address economic issues. Some commentators suggest that Pope Francis offers some kind of “Latin American” critique of capitalism, but in fact the ideas he presents have been articulated for decades by his predecessors, who have warned against a sort of unrestrained, unprincipled capitalism, a free market economy which is unhinged from any ethical consideration. This is when capitalism becomes oppressive and destructive.

What is the Church's alternative? Here we have the antidote as well: the spirituality of stewardship. We understand that God has entrusted temporal goods to us to be used for His purposes. We're at a critical juncture in the history of our country right now, as we are facing cultural and political trends that are wreaking havoc all around us in so many ways, from the breakup of the family to the destruction of the integrity of the environment, from the instrumentalization of human beings for the sake of profit to the outright destruction of human life even in its most vulnerable stages. But living by this utilitarian norm is as old as sin, and it doesn't work for reaching true happiness. It gets old. What doesn't get old is living the way God designed us to live, whether it is giving as a generous and responsible steward, or two becoming one flesh at the level of love as goodwill. This is what brings joy to another, and that never gets old; it is always new, always fresh, always young.

### **Stewards of Our Bodies**

I would propose, then, that we can best understand responsible parenthood within this vision of stewardship. Again, we are stewards of all of the material and spiritual blessings God has given us, and that includes the gift of our bodies. Even our very sexuality is a gift from God to be used for His purposes because His purposes are for our greatest good. As Pope Francis puts it in his Encyclical:

The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking

that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek 'to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it' [LS 155].

Reverence for the body runs very deep in the Christian religion. Recall the words of St. Paul: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:19-20). But in reflecting on responsible parenthood as an expression of stewardship, it is important to understand that care for creation, harmony in married life, a just society, and living in communion with God are all linked together; it is not just an interesting "take" on the many complex issues we face today. According to Pope Francis, it is only when our vision embraces all of these relationships that we will be on the right path to resolving these problems. He states quite categorically:

If the present ecological crisis is one small sign of the ethical, cultural and spiritual crisis of modernity, we cannot presume to heal our relationship with nature and the environment without healing all fundamental human relationships. Christian thought sees human beings as possessing a particular dignity above other creatures; it thus inculcates esteem for each person and respect for others. Our openness to others, each of whom is a 'thou' capable of knowing, loving and entering into dialogue, remains the source of our nobility as human persons. A correct relationship with the created world demands that we not weaken this social dimension of openness to others, much less the transcendent dimension of our openness to the 'Thou' of God. Our relationship with the environment can never be isolated from our relationship with others and with God. Otherwise, it would be nothing more than romantic individualism dressed up in ecological garb, locking us into a stifling immanence [LS 119].

## **Conclusion**

Pope Francis deals with vast issues in *Laudato si*, but as I conclude my presentation I would encourage you to reflect on one of his insights that brings that matter down to the day-to-day realities of life:

Saint Therese of Lisieux invites us to practise the little way of love, not to miss out on a kind word, a smile or any small gesture which sows peace and friendship. An integral ecology is also made up of simple daily gestures which break with the logic of violence, exploitation and selfishness. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms [LS 230].

Responsible parenthood helps to shape a world of mutual attention that is made up of countless little acts of kindness, a multitude of small sacrifices that make for a healthy environment in a couple's marriage. It makes of their family a school of ecology – physical, human, spiritual – that has an incalculable power to bring the family members to their human perfection and to bring healing to our troubled world.

I will end with the prayer with which our Holy Father concludes his Encyclical:

God of love, show us our place in this world  
as channels of your love  
for all the creatures of this earth,  
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.  
Enlighten those who possess power and money  
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,  
that they may love the common good, advance the weak,  
and care for this world in which we live.  
The poor and the earth are crying out.  
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,  
help us to protect all life,  
to prepare for a better future,  
for the coming of your Kingdom  
of justice, peace, love and beauty.  
Praise be to you!  
Amen [LS 246]