

BUILDING JERUSALEM IN THE JUNGLE: OUR CATHOLIC FAITH AND THE NEW SOCIAL/ECONOMIC THOUGHT

We are here today in the beautiful city of Rio de Janeiro, in the beautiful country of Brazil. The Jerusalem of my presentation's title is really what we Catholics call the civilization of love. And we are building this civilization not only amidst our natural environment but also amidst our built environment of cities and towns.

In a way, we are also building amidst the jungles of our own hearts and minds. Our conference topic of Jesus and nature naturally asks us to connect our Catholic faith with the natural environment—and, by extension, our human habitations as well. These natural and supernatural worlds are connected for us believers and we need to understand the connections better. That's one of the ways you can tell that someone is a Catholic—we are always trying to connect things.

Over the last two years or so, a group of North American writers and bloggers grew weary of the usual left-right debates and created an Internet forum which we called, on the model of hackerspaces and makerspaces, a thinkerspace: a place where people could go

and think together in a collaborative fashion. Solidarity Hall (located at www.solidarityhall.org) was a metaphor for an old house where people could meet up in a casual way and, as we put it, “re-imagine American community.” You will notice that I use the word “new” in various ways here—in the phrases New Economy or New Urbanism and so on. The irony, of course, is that most of the ideas I'm presenting here today are very far from new. They've simply been forgotten or ignored.

We also had in mind the spiritual witness of Solidarity, the Polish trade union movement in the 1980s. And of course we had in mind the term solidarity, very important in Catholic social teachings. Virtually all the Solidarity Hall contributors came from a faith-based background and many were Catholics with an understanding of Catholic social teachings. But we were willing to entertain, that is, to be hospitable to, ideas from practically anywhere. Thus what I'm going to say today is based on our experience of interacting with a wide range of thinkers

who have an interest in rebuilding our communities and protecting our various environments while doing so.

I should add that this presentation will resemble one of those fast surveys of the landscape, something like a mental zipline tour. So we will be covering a good deal of territory fairly quickly, and with not much more than a quick glance at some important areas.

For a topic that is so culturally ambitious, I think we need some inspiration. I want to borrow my structure for this talk from the great medieval Catholic poet, Dante. What we need, I suggest, is a three-part visionary framework, loosely adapted from his great poem, the Divine Comedy. Dante's *Inferno* will suggest the reality of our earthly landscapes today. His *Purgatorio* will suggest our need to rebuild civil society through a new economy of communion and the restoration of friendship, an aspect of personalism. And the *Paradiso* will suggest our need to adopt a new vision of the earthly city and its greenspaces, one grounded in our faith and in the great treasure of our Catholic social teachings.

One way to understand the current condition of the natural environment worldwide is to look at our cities. Over the next four decades, the United Nations (UN) predicts that cities will absorb virtually all of the world's population growth — of around 2.3 billion people. In developed countries, real estate developers are pushing a “worldclass lifestyle,” one that results in the rise of what are called “luxury cities,” places where middle-class families are moving out, leaving a mix of mostly low-wage and a much smaller number of wealthy citizens behind.

Increasingly, cities are inhospitable, especially in economic terms, for the middle class. And increasingly, middle-class families in the developed world, it should be added, are having fewer or no children. Part of the background for this change in the nature of cities is the rise of suburbia. Among the great social experiments of the last 50 years has been the growth of suburbs, places which tend to scatter community, increase isolation and create almost complete dependency upon automobiles. In the U.S., a 2010 [study by the American Farmland Trust](#) found that 41 million acres of rural land had been permanently lost in the preceding 25 years to highways, shopping malls, and other

development. We are approaching a point where very few people believe this kind of horizontal development can be sustained much longer.

Sometimes suburbs are seen as an expensive experiment primarily aimed at avoiding any and all unpleasantness in life, especially the kind that involves the presence of other people. Thus there is something about the very nature of suburbs that can fight against the idea of human solidarity.

Slums are connected with the suburbs in that they often arise in the aftermath of movement from the cities to those outer areas by groups who can afford to do so. And we see in the rise of “luxury cities” (Rio is an example) an economic process in which service sectors such as finance, healthcare and tourism occupy the nicer areas, serviced by low-wage workers who earn just enough to reside in the poorer neighborhoods. Ironically, it is usually in these same poorer neighborhoods where you find a kind of social network independent of the usual (and more expensive) human services, through neighborhood groups operating at the fringes of society. This bottom-up solidarity can include negative forces, such as drug trafficking and a black market economy controlled by mafia-like

forces. But the persistence and growth of community self-help activities are also a sign of something hopeful.

Urbanization requires raw materials. Some developing economies have been consuming natural resources at a furious pace in recent decades, even as we are coming to understand better the price we will have to pay for this short-term consumption and short-sighted economic growth.

Still, not all cities survive. In those which once depended upon traditional manufacturing, the rise of a post-industrial economic order in recent decades has meant abandonment and neglect, not only of the buildings but of the inhabitants as well.

The city of Detroit, for example, is typical of many cities of the American Midwest: it is shrinking, contracting, due to large population losses over the last half century. The infrastructure of these cities is decaying, whole neighborhoods have been abandoned by their residents and are now full of empty houses. On the other hand, neighborhood groups in these places are also working to create a more resilient, self-sufficient community through urban farming. Detroit now has almost 500 urban gardens, most of

them community gardens aimed at transforming “food deserts” into a new local food economy. (There’s that word “new”.)

Another kind of hellishness is created by a change in the nature of our culture, called by one social critic “technopolis.” By technopolis, I mean a society under the sway of technopoly or a regime in which citizens believe that “the primary, if not the only, goal of human labor and thought is efficiency, that technical calculation is in all respects superior to human judgment ... and that the affairs of citizens are best guided and conducted by experts.” The reign of technopoly includes, by the way, biotechnology, with all the techniques which threaten to alter not only our food but also our very human nature in search of a limitless and painless biological existence—for some, at least.

An important but diminishing concept in these all developments is that of the commons, which historically was always a kind of link between the natural and the built environments. The commons were traditionally defined as the elements of the [environment](#) - forests, atmosphere, rivers, fisheries or grazing land - that are shared, used and enjoyed by all. Today, the commons

are also understood within a [cultural](#) sphere. These commons include literature, music, arts, design, film, video, television, radio, information, software and sites of heritage. The commons can also include [public goods](#) such as public space, public education, health and the infrastructure that allows our society to function (such as electricity or water delivery systems). There also exists the ‘life commons’, e.g. the human genome.

As we’ll come to shortly, there’s a connection between the commons and the larger concept of the common good, which is simply the good of the community.

Now let’s ascend with Dante to his second otherworldly kingdom, that on the slopes of the Mount of Purgatory, the only section of his poem which occurs in earthly time and which offers an image of human community striving for union with God.

The Purgatorio is filled with friendship, fellowship, political and philosophical reflections on earthly limitations and blessings, including Dante’s complaint about his native city’s incessant lust for new things (rather than valuing traditions) and his yearning that his fellow citizens would use their moral freedom to build a peaceful and

stable society through a kind of Christian humanism.

Like Dante, we must move on from these hellish visions and see out the wisdom that would restore community.

Not many years after Dante's death, the painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted a series of frescoes on the walls of the Palazzo Pubblico (or City Hall) in Siena, not far from Dante's own Florence.

His allegories of the effects of good and bad governments symbolically urged Sieneese politicians to consider the common good and to act virtuously, seated as they were under the gaze of figures representing the four cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and courage, with the additional figures of Peace and Magnanimity.

While the supernatural virtues of faith, hope and charity also appear in these frescoes, the cardinal virtues are not of Christian but classical origin, especially as described by Aristotle in his ethical works and as expanded and revised by St. Thomas Aquinas.

These cardinal virtues were believed to be universal and were also embraced by

medieval Jewish and Arab thinkers and commentators. The tradition of the virtues may sound specifically Catholic but is actually inherently multi-cultural, with parallels in multiple world cultures. It is grounded in the belief that there exists within every human being a sense of a natural law underlying our motives and actions. C.S. Lewis called this way of understanding the Tao and likewise noted its universality.

So in formulating our approach to our several different environments—natural, built and intellectual—we Catholics begin with Scripture, Tradition and something called the natural law.

Today we are mostly focussing on what the notion of natural law and the tradition of the virtues have to do with nature, the commons and the common good.

I want to recommend to everyone who is not already at least three-book Catholic that you become one. A three-book Catholic owns and studies, first, a Bible. Ignorance of Scripture, as Saint Jerome said rather flatly, is ignorance of Christ. Second, the Catechism is a highly readable presentation of our faith in four sections: our creedal beliefs, then our liturgy and sacraments; next the moral law

and the commandments; and finally our life in prayer.

Finally, the third book, published in English in 2004 by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, is the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, which is a rather wooden-sounding title for what is really a marvellous text describing what a civilization of love looks like and acts like.

Here we find sections on God's plan of love for humanity, the human person and human rights, the principle of the common good, the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, the family as the vital cell of society, the dignity of and right to work, the political community, the international community, the promotion of peace, and indeed safeguarding the environment.

These are all themes from what is called Catholic social teaching, a tradition which Peter Maurin called the unexploded dynamite of the Church, the powerful but still little-known or followed guidelines of distilled human wisdom that only a two-millennium old institution could develop.

Drawing partly on the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* among other documents, the

Compendium directly addresses the crisis in the relationship between man and the environment, especially the view that nature is merely a raw material to be manipulated by technology or its extreme counterpart, that nature should be absolutized and placed above the dignity of the human person itself. The environment is in fact a collective good. The uses of biotechnology must therefore be evaluated with a particular view to their justice and solidarity.

Finally, the Compendium links the environmental crisis with poverty and calls for the rise of new lifestyles that break with the culture of consumption in order to encourage an attitude of gratitude and appreciation at a world which reveals the mystery of God who created and sustains it.

In addition to these three texts, we have also the treasury of the Church's social teachings as expressed in her encyclicals on society. These documents offer us valuable frameworks for our thinking about society, economics, politics and the environment. The texts of Vatican II also contain numerous references to Church teachings on society.

If we had the time, we could explore the river of social movements that flowed from *Rerum Novarum*, including the distributism of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, the Catholic Worker movement of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, and others.

These efforts had a kind of spiritual success and have always had at least a small following in the U.K. and in the U.S. and to some degree elsewhere. But the rise of both the welfare state and what some would argue is the inevitable individualist ethic that accompanies it have until recently slowed much practical success for either effort.

Things have begun to change, however. Possibly one of the most significant revolutions underway today in the aftermath of the global recession which began in 2008 is what we might call the rise of a natural law economics, including a project called the economy of communion, specifically mentioned by Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate* and one which we'll come back to in a moment. All of these developments are very much relevant to the way we view and live within our environment.

Two recent key texts here for those of you who wish to dig deeper on economic

questions-- Both the books address the collapse of conventional (neoclassical/Austrian) economic theory and the economic philosophy of neoliberalism which we might roughly define as uncritical globalization, minimal regulation of markets and (more recently) the supplanting of the real economy by a process of financialization and commodification.

The origins of the economic regrounding found in these books is a combination of classical and Christian thinking, including ideas found in the first modern social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, as well as the writings of Catholic figures such as GK Chesterton and E.F. Schumacher, author of the very influential book, *Small is Beautiful*.

This movement is a return to the historical and ethical roots of economic thinking: it attempts to restore a number of missing pieces--the idea of distributive justice, the role of gifts in human behavior and even the very idea of limits and human scale. It is one part—and for us, the most important part—of a broader and somewhat diffuse movement called the New Economy.

So just as the title of *Rerum Novarum* indicated “new things,” this interest in a

natural law approach to economics is a new development in the history of some old ideas.

Another set of ideas suggesting a new (actually now a half-century old) reaction to the ugliness and theoretical incoherence of modernism is that of the New Urbanism. New urbanism is partly a reaction to suburban sprawl but it is not merely reactionary in nature: it could also be defined as a recovery of human scale, expressed in walkable, mixed-use public spaces found in traditional town and city neighborhoods.

New urbanism is agnostic about most matters of philosophy but it does contain Aristotelian impulses toward human scale, favoring smaller cities, neighborhoods and towns over megalopolis—which makes it an opponent of modernist projects such as the city of Brasilia, created (in the New Urbanist critique) as a kind of inhuman utopian vision arising more out of a city planner's dream than out of its own natural environment.

New urbanism is a response to the accelerating loss of social capital in many developed countries. Diminished social capital means: the neighborhood doesn't contain real neighbors any more, just strangers who happen to live near each other.

New urbanism can also be approached from a natural law and Catholic perspective.

Neither the marketplace nor the government can teach us how to love our own places.

Between the broken marketplace and dysfunctional government, a need to regenerate society, especially locally, devolving power and budgets. UK's Big Society project—David Cameron's govt is giving local communities grants to take over pubs, shops, libraries and other local amenities that are threatened with closure or privatization.

The Catholic term for this process is subsidiarity: the idea that human affairs are best handled at the lowest possible level. Taxation, for example, may be best handled at the national level but many other practical matters are better suited for state or local authorities.

Jumping back to the New Economy for a moment, let's take a Catholic development within it. The Economy of Communion is a Movement started in 1991 in Sao Paolo, as part of a response to the new Brazilian constitution of 1988, which proposed to eliminate poverty and social inequality. The EoC's founder is also the founder of the

Focolare movement, Chiara Lubich, whose presentation of her ideas in 1991 set off what Focolare members describe as a “love bomb” of interest in the EOC’s approach to a new view of economic life.

More than just fighting poverty, the larger vision here is to create a new civilization of love and a culture of giving. The clarity of this EoC vision earned it a mention by name, in fact, in the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. If you google the term Economy of Communion, you’ll find their site and much interesting information on how this movement is bringing a Catholic, personalist dimension to what is called the New Economy.

How many here have ever heard of Fr. Josemaria Arizmendiaretta? He was a Basque priest whose experience of the destruction of Europe during World War II led him to found a trade school and then a small cooperative business in the town of Mondragon. These enterprises were created specifically on the principles of Catholic social thought and emphasize worker ownership and decision-making, with minimal difference between labor and management.

Today the Mondragon Corporation is the seventh largest company in Spain, has 83,000 employees, some \$14 billion in sales, is a world leader among cooperative businesses, and is a remarkable example of a relatively recession-proof enterprise in which almost no one is laid off for economic reasons. The Mondragon model has been imitated elsewhere, including more recently Cleveland Ohio, where the Evergreen Coops were created partly in consultation with Mondragon Corp. And interestingly enough, a cause for sainthood has been opened in recent years for Fr. Josemaria Arizmendiaretta.

John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is a large subject in itself and is an example of another recent and wonderful development: the rise of a specifically Christian anthropology. So many modern spiritual systems take a very disincarnate view of human life, as though we were merely spirits temporarily inhabiting a worthless shell. This devaluing of incarnate life is, you might say, profoundly unCatholic, and it leads to a distorted sense of human life. *The Theology of the Body* is primarily concerned with family life but it points toward broader concerns in fields such as medicine, sports, nutrition, and even work.

Wendell Berry, an American farmer, essayist, novelist and social critic with a Christian and rather sacramental worldview. His most recent fame has come from his influence on what is called the food movement but his vision of the good life includes a range of ideas: sustainable agriculture, [appropriate technologies](#), healthy [rural communities](#), connection to place, the pleasures of good food, [husbandry](#), good work, local [economics](#), the [miracle](#) of life, fidelity, [frugality](#), reverence, and the interconnectedness of life.

If you don't know Berry's work, you might begin with probably his most famous book, his collection of essays called *The Unsettling of America*, which is now a classic text for everyone trying to make the connection between culture and agriculture. Berry, by the way, does not encourage us to persist in using the term "environment." Here is what he had to say about the word:

"The idea that we live in something called "the environment," for instance, is utterly preposterous. This word came into use because of the pretentiousness of learned experts who were embarrassed by the religious associations of "Creation" and who thought "world" too mundane. But

"environment" means that which surrounds or encircles us; it means a world separate from ourselves, outside us. The real state of things, of course, is far more complex and intimate and interesting than that. The world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. It is also a Creation, a holy mystery, made for and to some extent by creatures, some but by no means all of whom are humans. This world, this Creation, belongs in a limited sense to us, for we may rightfully require certain things of it—the things necessary to keep us fully alive as the kind of creature we are—but we also belong to it, and it makes certain rightful claims on us: that we care properly for it, that we leave it undiminished not just to our children but to all creatures who will live in it after us. None of this intimacy and responsibility is conveyed by the word environment... Not only is this language incapable of giving a true description of our relation to the world; it is also academic, artificial, and pretentious. It is the sort of language used by a visiting expert who does not want the local people to ask any question".

And here are some sentences from an essay in that book called “The Body and the Earth,” one of the most Catholic reflections on Creation I can think of. Berry is not a Catholic and the essay was written quite a few years before John Paul wrote his *Theology of the Body*. And yet it’s striking how close Berry’s thoughts are to the same reconsideration of our embodiedness and its implications for us and for creation, as Berry might say.

Consider the following idea from the section on the idea of fidelity in all its applications: “It may be that the principle of sexual fidelity, once it is again fully understood, will provide us with as good an example as we can find of the responsible use of energy. Sexuality is, after all, a form of energy, one of the most powerful. If we see sexuality as energy, then it becomes impossible to see sexual fidelity as merely a “duty,” a virtue for the sake of virtue, or a superstition. If we made a superstition of fidelity [as some critics of Xty might argue], and thereby weakened it, by thinking of it as purely a moral or spiritual virtue, then perhaps we can restore its strength by recovering an awareness of its practicality.”

Another theme of Berry’s, relevant to today’s conversation, is that of wildness and its necessity. The threat to Creation, he suggests, is not only in the totalitarian desire for absolute control. It lies in the willingness to ignore an essential paradox: the natural forces that so threaten us are the same forces that preserve and renew us.

An enduring agriculture must never cease to consider and respect and preserve wildness. The farm can exist only within the wilderness of mystery and natural force. And if the farm is to last and remain in health, the wilderness must survive within the farm... The farm must yield a place to the forest, not as a wood lot, or even as a necessary agricultural principle, but as a sacred grove—a place where Creation is let alone, to serve as instruction, example, refuge; a place for people to go, free of work and presumption, to let themselves alone.

I hope these sublime ideas have helped lift us up to the final landscape of Dante’s great poem, his *Paradise* in which we find the Fourth Heaven, that of the Sun, where theologians and teachers abide. Here, in Canto 12, Dante listens to St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican, praise the founder of the Franciscan order, St. Francis of Assisi, for



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his marriage to Lady Poverty and his great example of charity.

St. Francis is of course also the patron of all creation and thus of this conference. We should take it as a wonderful sign that our new Pope has identified himself with

Francis' two key charisms, that of solidarity with the poor and care for creation. If we can learn from the beautiful traditions and teachings of our faith, we will participate in this rebirth Franciscan spirituality beginning to spread across our Church.