

Human Ecology in the Template of the Family – José Ambrozic – Sept/15

Ecology as a term was used originally to describe the “economies” of living forms. From the greek *oikos* that means house, household or family; referring not only to the physical structure or the individuals involved, but the whole community and operating unit. The term ecosystem borrowed the human concept of community and applied it to natural environments. Organisms sharing the same habitat, as they interacted among themselves and with the environment, would form biotic communities, complex organisms with a life cycle and a degree of stability. The whole would be more than the sum of its parts and environmentalists could claim the moral demand that ecosystems had a natural order that should not be disturbed or damaged by human action. This concept provides useful insights for human ecology: the community formed by different live agents, interacting between themselves and the environment; the interdependence of the agents and the environment; the environment being constantly affected and changed by the agents; some discernible patterns or rules of healthy interaction; and a discernible order based on the nature of the agents, which needs to be respected and cared for. A Catholic human ecology seeks to broaden this community of the creatures that conform the natural environment in three distinct aspects. One is achieved by including the human persons as a key part of the ecological community. The second one, is done by including, not only the material, physical dimension, but also the meta-physical and spiritual, so as to encompass the whole of the reality of the human. The third is achieved by including the historical/temporal dimension, particularly when the consequences on future generations are factored into the analysis.

The human habitat has to be ecological. Ecology was the subject of John Paul II’s 1990 Peace Message. He saw the lack of respect for nature as a threat to world peace, and also as an expression of a deeper moral crisis reflecting selfishness, dishonesty, disregard for others, contempt for man and for life. (JP2 Peace Msg 1990) He also stressed the interdependence not only of countries, but also among diverse dimensions of life. Worldviews, religious convictions and morals, science and business strategies, government policies and international bodies, war, migration, lifestyles and poverty, urban planning, education and solidarity, family life and the economy; all affect each other. They are affected by and affect the environment. He used the terms “ecosystem” and “delicate ecological balances” (Id, 6,7) to emphasize this interdependence of actions previously regarded as unrelated. This is in the very nature of the universe. “Theology, philosophy and science all speak of a harmonious universe, of a “cosmos” endowed with its own integrity, its own internal, dynamic balance. This order must be respected. The human race is called to explore this order, to examine it with due care and to make use of it while safeguarding its integrity.” (Id, 8)

The concern for the environment had been raised by Paul VI in 1971, calling for a common responsibility in regards to a shared destiny. He warned “that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature [man] risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation... [even] the human framework is no longer under man's control, thus creating an environment for tomorrow which may well be intolerable. This is a wide-ranging social problem which concerns the entire human family.” (Paul VI, Octogesima Adveniens, 21) More recently Pope Benedict called attention to its relevance for peace: “Respect for creation is of immense consequence, not least because “creation is the beginning and the foundation of all God’s works”, and its preservation has now become essential for the pacific coexistence of mankind.”, but also its connection to man’s pursuit of welfare and happiness: “Integral human development is closely linked to the obligations which flow from man’s relationship with the natural environment.”(Ben XVI Peace Msg. 2010, 1,2) The ecological problems alluded involve and threaten all dimensions of human life and peaceful coexistence. It involves the moral and spiritual inasmuch as our lifestyles and choices impact the welfare and

even survival of others, both in the present time and in future generations. No one can act with selfishness or indifference to the plight of others without diminishing their own humanity and without harming their own conscience and heart.

There is an opportunity in the awareness of ecological challenges present today. (JP2 Peace Msg. 1990,1) While it carries many misconceptions and distortions, it has spurred a willingness to act. Some people might have replaced their faith and their notions of good and evil with a ecological commitment that is reductive and allows them to ease their conscience by practicing some environmental measures that do not challenge their lifestyles or other convictions. For them, it will be a challenge to their intelligence and goodwill to recognize the holistic nature of the ecological problems and strive for the changes needed in their lives. This persuasive power of ecology in the present time, and the concept of ecosystem which helps visualize the interdependence of so many factors and dimensions, can help raise the relevance in today's culture and society of many issues so close to the heart of the Church and so relevant to the welfare and flourishing of mankind.

Ecology has to be human. There is much argument about the place and role of the human in ecology. A sound ecology has to be human, because the world, the environment we know, does not make sense without mankind. "God entrusted the whole of creation to the man and woman.... [calling them to put] into play those abilities and gifts which distinguish the human being from all other creatures." There is an unavoidable difference between humans and the rest of creation. God "established a fixed relationship between mankind and the rest of creation. Made in the image and likeness of God, Adam and Eve were to have exercised their dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28) with wisdom and love." (JP2 Peace Msg. 1990, 3) This dominion has been misunderstood as exploitation in the modern and postmodern context of the last two hundred years, so fixed with the notions of instrumental logic and power. Dominion in Genesis comes from the Greek *arje*, which relates to the mastery, stewardship and responsible care exercised by the Lord and Master Jesus Christ. It implies love, concern and responsibility. (Ben XVI Peace Msg. 2010, 6). Northcott, Passmore and others make the case that it is actually the betrayal of Catholic view by the enlightenment and some protestant approaches that provided the reasoning that allowed the exploitation of nature. Currently, many insist that there is no fundamental difference between man and other creatures and that pretending a special place for man is an anthropocentric bias. However, many of them unwittingly acknowledge man's particular relevance in that they enjoin humans to act or abstain in issues that affect the environment, which they do not ask or expect of other creatures. Beavers will flood valleys, predators will act as such and species will drive out, exterminate or asphyxiate others without concern for the consequences; much less for biodiversity. It is significant that the criteria we use to determine the value of beauty, biodiversity, etc., of natural environments is unavoidably from a human perspective, and that we, as humans, take upon ourselves the duty of avoiding harmful actions and correcting damage done to the environment. Of course, this approach is consistent with having free will and conscience and recognizing our role and duty of dominion as responsibility, not arguing that we have the same responsibility as any other animal or organism. Other creatures are not capable of this, but the human person has the capacity of being aware of the needs of others, and therefore the freedom and duty to assess and respond to those needs, which gives him this special dignity that sets him apart. He can, and has abused this greater capacity not living up to his duty and dignity, but for the same reason, he can choose to work to restore it.

The Catholic view enriches Human Ecology. The notion of Human ecology has been around for a century. First it focused on the human impact on the environment and then on the environment's impact on the human. Later it considered human systems such as cities, culture

and architecture. It has also included geography, sociology, the psychological, urban planning and economy, moving recently from the multidisciplinary to the interdisciplinary. This has established a strong analogy between the ecology of nature and the human, but still lacking order and harmony. The Catholic approach can provide such order and harmony from an integrated perspective. It also provides, being the Church “expert in humanity”, the truth about God and his design on the universe and man and his place in it. It contributes to ethical social reasoning with its values, with the wealth of centuries of proven and discussed arguments, and provides the moral energy to engage people in the works of justice. The Roman Catholic tradition has always relied on reasoned inquiry to approach the truth and the good which allows it to interact with diverse intellectual disciplines.

Catholic thought on social issues defends the life and dignity of the human person because of its transcendent nature, modeled in the image and likeness of God. It defends the rights implied in that dignity, but also the ecology, the living conditions that are consistent with it. That dignity implies a transcendent and spiritual purpose that has valuable meaning and that implies self-giving for the good, life, and dignity of others. Human ecology requires a complex approach that involves charity and truth, scientific research and moral evaluation, and a score of disciplines properly combined as it seeks the integral good of man. “It is here above all that the Church's social doctrine displays its dimension of wisdom. ... among the causes of underdevelopment there is a lack of wisdom and reflection, a lack of thinking capable of formulating a guiding synthesis, for which “a clear vision of all economic, social, cultural and spiritual aspects” is required.”(Caritas in veritate 31)

Human ecology is enhanced by the family. Not only because “[t]he first and fundamental structure for “human ecology” is the family, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person. [and] Here we mean the family founded on marriage, in which the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment...” (CA 39) Family also places us in the context of encounter and gift – no longer centered in the self, but focused on others and the love and space –not merely physical- we share, which implies the common good. So, the family is not only the fundamental structure, but also the model on how to organically develop a human ecology.

The common good is not limited to material needs, but caring also for the moral, spiritual, and relational needs of all persons involved and the sustainability of the human ecology that provides for those needs. In the case of the family, it is grounded in the common space of the authentic love that has its source in the communion of love of the Trinity; the love expressed to man by God the Father through creation and His providential care for us; the greatest love of Christ laying down His life for us in the cross; the all-pervasive love and grace bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit; and the love modelled by Joseph, Mary and Jesus in the Holy Family. That love is founded in God’s love for us, that when acknowledged with gratitude sparks the awe and the willingness to respond with the utmost generosity. It treasures the gift received and experiences the fulfillment of the encounter. We often say that love is not merely a feeling but a conscious decision that expresses a solid commitment of the whole person, reason, heart and will. Here we are saying that such a commitment is the grateful and only possible response to such a gift. I cannot honestly and authentically spurn God’s love for me; I cannot despise or neglect the gifts he lovingly prepared and bestowed on me: life, creation, grace, redemption and forgiveness, vocation and mission, and his other children that he has put in my life; I cannot reject the woman I’ve received to live out the vocation of family with nor the children I’ve engendered. I cannot not love what God has given me, and if I truly love, there is no reason to stop loving, ever.

That is why in family, everyone is loved and welcomed, regardless of what they can contribute or not. Everyone is loved for who she is, not for merits, skills or their paycheck. Infants and the elderly have a special place and recognition. There is awareness and caring for the weak and needy, expecting cooperation to the degree of each one's abilities. Each one is expected to put in their share, but patience and forgiveness is always there. The family cherishes what is particular in each, and seeks a higher integration for all members, not merely tolerating others and their interests but valuing them for themselves. A family is concerned for the welfare of all and mindful of the future, of the common good of future generations.

The economy in the family has a purpose and it's the well being of all members of the family seeking the most efficient way of allocating resources to serve their needs. In the present time the growth of the economy is sought for its own sake. Financialization and consumerism are some of the most toxic dynamics of this process in which the latter leads to excess in the use of natural resources, in the consumption of energy that burns fossil fuel generating greenhouse gases, use of human work and ingenuity that could be better aimed, and waste. Financialization is no longer geared to serve the efficient allocation of resources, but to profit from the imbalances that it finds or even generates, sometimes developing into hugely damaging crises. Economy needs to be refocused on serving the real needs of people and not its own goals. The lifestyles of the developed nations are not only unsustainable, but holding them up as model of the quality of life that all people should aspire to is either deceitful or insane. All the technological improvements that marginally make production of goods and services more ecologically efficient are meager compared to the orders of magnitude by which that lifestyle exceeds its allowable footprint. A deep moral conversion is needed to make the needed adjustments in that lifestyle to make it sustainable.

Solidarity and reconciliation in the family are the norm. Solidarity naturally excludes abuse. The ecology of nature and human ecology are deeply intertwined. Not only injustice and abuse in one affects the other¹, but the response of humankind very closely decides the fate of the creation we so much love and care for. Along with care for the natural environment, we also have to care for a "human ecology" that provides the space for the dignity and fulfillment of the human person and the good life for all according to God's plan.² Following Vatican II, both the social and ecological problems rest in the heart of man: "The truth is that the imbalances under which the modern world labors are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man."³ Human ecology shows that the best environmentalist is the saint, who loves in the image of Jesus Christ. Solidarity seeks communion and its recovery through reconciliation. If we are all children of God and we share that with all creation as Francis showed in calling all creatures brothers and sisters, then the human being made for relationship and encounter at his deepest core. Relationship and love are what fulfills us; this has been broken by original sin and our own sins. We therefore are called to reconciliation at four fundamental levels, in order of importance, as outlined in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*: "four reconciliations which repair the four fundamental rifts; reconciliation of man with God, with self, with the brethren and with the whole of creation."⁴ This reconciliatory perspective lends itself to exploring the "culture of encounter" (so often repeated by Pope Francis) with others and the environment. The answer to a "culture of greed and waste" is the "culture of encounter", of giving and of charity, so natural in the family. A human economy must not be ruled by greed or consumerism, but use its wealth and resources in solidarity, among people and nations, so the world's population

¹ *Centesimus annus* 37; World Day of Peace 2007, 8; *Caritas in veritate*, 51; World Day of Peace 2010, 11.

² *Centesimus annus* 38; *Evangelium Vitae*, 42.

³ *Gaudium et spes*, 10.

⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 26.

can satisfy its needs and live in dignity. Responsible stewardship over nature must ensure its protection and the sustainability of the entire human family now and in the future.⁵

Popes John Paul, Benedict and Francis have emphasized the need for a change of lifestyles: solidarity, suffering with others, using and having less in order to give more to others. Solidarity should be a guiding principle upon engaging specific environmental problems. In the complex and multivariate issue of climate change, solidarity privileges approaches that emphasize adaptation, that is, helping vulnerable communities and even ecosystems who are at risk, rather than first investing in technological or long term economic solutions that disregard the immediate needs of the poor.

Power and charity in the family. God's command for man to 'subdue' and 'lord' over creation is within our sharing in the kingly mission of Christ⁶. Likewise is our duty to order society according to a human ecology. This is best understood in the family as parents have the power to decide but they are meant to use it out of love and in the service of all. That is the meaning Jesus has given to power and authority: "the exercise of authority is service: we must never forget that true power, at any level, is service, whose bright summit is upon the Cross. Benedict XVI reminded that although man frequently equates authority with control, dominion, success, for God authority is always synonymous with service, humility, love; as Jesus who kneels to wash the Apostles' feet (cf. *Angelus*, 29 January 2012), and says to his disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them... It shall not be so among you."⁷ Abuse to both the natural and human ecology comes from revering the power of exercising reason and freedom without reference to what is good and true;⁸ without subordinating them to charity. Charity that seeks the good of all will seek human ecology as the healthy environment conducive to authentic human fulfillment.⁹ Charity in truth is the force that leads to human development and fulfillment as well as to the healthy ordering of society through justice and the common good,¹⁰ fostering a human ecology. Being a common space, human ecology requires the existence of a public space and language for the family of peoples to reflect and debate what is truly right and just; drawing from nature, conscience and reason to seek in common the defense of human rights, peace and justice.¹¹ A public space not constrained by relativism, positivism or any ideology or prejudice, but open to all women and men of good will.¹²

Human ecology, family and evangelization. Finally, the interest among modern culture, and especially the youth, on issues of ecology and human ecology can be a great avenue to encounter Jesus Christ. As the experience of love in the family helps human ecology, human ecology can also help to evangelize culture by framing urgent social issues, such as those related to the family or to sustainable development, in an appealing way, with an objective reference to nature and placing individual rights in the context of the common good. This invites Catholics to evangelize and reach those who are on the peripheries. Experiences in nature and beauty, as well as those in the family such as the wonder of newlyweds or a newborn child can provide opportunities for witnessing to the beauty and wisdom of God's love, of the human vocation to love, and the wonderful gift of creation.

⁵ *Caritas in veritate*, 50, 51.

⁶ *Christifideles laici*, 14.

⁷ (Pope Francis, Address to the International Union of Superiors General, 8 May 2013).

⁸ Leo XIII, *Libertas*, 15; *Centesimus annus*, 4.

⁹ *Centesimus annus*, 38.

¹⁰ *Caritas in veritate*, 1, 2, 6, 7.

¹¹ *Benedict XVI, Address to German Parliament, Sept. 2011*.

¹² *Benedict XVI, Address to German Parliament, Sept. 2011; Benedict XVI, Address to La Sapienza, Jan. 2008*