I think the question my paper is asking here today is: for us Christians, how is our ability to love our neighbors affected when the neighborhood itself—that delicate ecosystem of people in a particular landscape—no longer exists? How do we regenerate a neighborhood, a blessed community, as it’s sometimes called, if it’s gone, no longer functioning in the way such places should?

In thinking about these questions, we American Catholics may come to see the papal documents Laudato Si and Evangelii Gaudium as a kind of kairos moment, an unforeseen opportunity. Speaking here mostly in a personal way, I’d like to sketch out what I see as three dimensions of this opportunity, using three scenes from my own experience.

The first scene is from two summers ago, when I found myself and two of our teenage daughters standing on Copacabana Beach in Rio, in a crowd of one million plus, awaiting the arrival of Pope Francis for World Youth Day. We were there, courtesy of Creatio and Ricardo Simmonds, to participate in a conference and indeed to experience an event of our global church family.

The usual thing to say about being part of such a moment, after being surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people waving flags from over one hundred countries, is “I never realized just how big the Church is.” And not only in numbers. I might have remembered what G.K. Chesterton once said about converts to the faith: that they are usually surprised to find that the Church is larger on the inside than the outside.

Part of what I came to realize standing on the beach and in the weeks following had to do with the rise of the global South in our Church—Latin America in particular—and the way it is bringing new winds of spiritual growth.

One example is the theology of encounter, about which both Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XIV have written warmly in Pope Francis’ first encyclical, Lumen Fidei. Against our society’s growing social and geographical isolation, against the throwaway culture, a true encounter occurs when we cross over the boundaries—physically and in our own thinking about our neighbors.

An encounter often changes our plans, our daily schedule, even our career path. It liberates us and, as Pope Francis put it, it enlarges our hearts. It can change the hierarchy of our loves into a proper order. I think the theology of encounter is the key piece in any effort of evangelization.

Another example of a new spiritual wind blowing is the economy of communion, a group of businesses which take their guiding principles from the Focolare movement. This international network of
companies are one notable group in the larger movement toward a more humanized, people-centered economy of the kind Pope Francis calls for in both his recent encyclicals.

It’s also an example of one of his four priorities for the common good (listed in Evangelii Gaudium): the way the whole is greater than the parts.

The second scene is the Rocinha neighborhood of Rio, where I went on a favela tour during our week in Rio. I might say I found the favela to be shocking—only because it was very different from what I had expected.

Almost 12 million Brazilians (about 6% of the population) live in favelas—meaning, areas of informal housing built by local residents out of scrap materials and usually not supported with conventional city services. Rio has roughly 600 such neighborhoods, housing about a quarter of the city’s population. Rocinha, one of the best-known, is located on a steep hillside facing Rio’s bay, giving residents what would count anywhere else in the world as a million-dollar view.

Unlike many poor neighborhoods in the U.S., the majority of Brazilian favelas have operated with a high degree of self-sufficiency and sustainability (dare we say, subsidiarity and solidarity?) now for several generations. Urban planners describe them now as follows:

1. Neighborhoods that emerge from an unmet need for housing.
2. Established and developed without external or government regulation.
3. Their original blueprint established and developed organically and by residents themselves.
4. Continuously evolving based on culture, access to resources and jobs.

Surprisingly, the average wage has increased by 55% over the last decade in these areas. Of the ones plagued by drugs and crime, a growing number have been pacified and several have even become tourist attractions, offering local food, arts and crafts, entertainment and even Air-BNB-style vacations.

In fact, the more successful favelas remind a visitor of descriptions of any American city neighborhood a few generations ago—a mix of walkability, sociability, and street life. It’s important to compare this relative success to the typical problems with public housing, of which Rio has its share.

In paragraph 148 of Laudato Si, Pope Francis comments on these informal settlements (as they’re sometimes called), “A wholesome social life can light up a seemingly undesirable environment. At times a commendable human ecology is practiced by the poor despite numerous hardships. The feeling of asphyxiation brought on by densely populated residential areas is countered if close and warm relationships develop, if communities are created, if the limitations of the environment are compensated for in the interior of each person who feels held within a network of solidarity and belonging. In this way, any place can turn from being a hell on earth into the setting for a dignified life.”

I hope it’s clear the Pope is not suggesting here that adequate public sanitation, access to education, and safe electrical systems are not important. But I do think he’s probably mindful of the projections that by 2050, around one third of the world’s population is expected to be living in informal settlements:
how governments interact with these neighborhoods (or don’t) will have large consequences for their inhabitants.

So what we might call favela economics would seem to be a fascinating new dimension in international development efforts, especially in the way these places foster a kind of organic sociability which other, wealthier neighborhoods can only dream of.

Footnote 117 in Laudato Si indicates Pope Francis’ awareness of these issues and the hopeful possibilities in the work of his theologian friend and former teacher Juan Carlos Scannone. They are part of the document’s urging of new views of the economy and the definition of progress.

Finally, my last scene—also from this admittedly transformative visit to Rio in 2013—is in the common room of our guest house in the Santa Teresa neighborhood of Rio. I’m recalling here a moment when a dozen or more of us were sitting around after dinner, taking turns with the guitar and singing folk and pop songs from France, England, the U.S. and various Latin countries.

Finally the half-dozen or so Spanish speakers in the room, all men at that point, began a song called “Santa Maria de Latin America.” It was addressed to the Virgin Mary and contained references to each of her major shrines—in Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Columbia, Paraguay, Venezuela, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala. To my amazement, the singers seemed to know every verse of the song, a cultural feat of devotion which I had a hard time imagining a group of American Catholic men matching.

But this encounter—as it was for me—suggests another opportunity in the coming times—the recovery of the particular type of liberation theology known as theology of the people, grounded in the popular piety of the people (rather than in a notion of class struggle and warfare) and in the radical subsidiarity and solidarity of the favelas. It turns out integral ecology can co-exist with gospel poverty, something American Catholics were at least familiar with at one time through the example of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. Her newly-fueled cause for canonization is more timely than ever now.

Some fear that the message of Laudato Si contains elements of political revolution but they read in haste. Instead, the message here is much deeper, urging something closer to cultural revolution, although one very unlike our recent and failed attempts at mere culture war.

Instead, it seems that care for our common home—and our neighborhood—will involve a church which is more Marian and (as section 242 indicates) and which also draws upon the generosity and tenderness of St. Joseph. What an opportunity this moment is bringing us, born of the Holy Spirit.