Habits of Presence and the Generosity of Creation:
Ecology in Light of Integral Human Development
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Integral human development sets the context within which alone an adequate approach to ecology can be conceived and realized. We will focus on the key principles of this proposal in terms of the habits of presence demanded by the generosity inherent in creation.

The term ecology, as is well-known, comes from oeco (Latin), or oiko (Greek), meaning “household”; and the term “household” continues to provide a key, via analogy, in any adequate reading of ecology. Ecology is defined as the science concerned with the interrelationship, or total patterns of relations, between organisms and their environment. Our task is to consider the root meaning of a true ecology, one in which organisms—both human and non-human living beings, and indeed all cosmological entities—exist with integrity, in themselves and in relation to others and ultimately to God.

Ecology and Integral Human Development. “Integral human development,” or “the principle of universality,” is rightly called the central principle of Catholic social teaching—from Populorum Progressio through Sollicitudo Rei Socialis and Caritas in Veritate, and taken up anew in Evangelii Gaudium.

It is not hard to see the intrinsic link between integral human development and ecology. Pope Francis, following Paul VI, says that integral development is directed to all men and the whole man (EG, 181). Francis says that this principle—the principle of universality—is intrinsic to the Gospel, which involves the salvation of every man and woman and includes “gathering up all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth” (Eph. 1:10; cf. EG, 181; emphasis added).

Pope Francis, in his World Day of Peace Message of 2014, indicates the link between human ecology and creation and nature:

The human family has received from the Creator a common gift: nature. The Christian view of creation includes a positive judgment about the legitimacy of interventions on nature if these are meant to be beneficial and are performed responsibly. That is to say, by acknowledging the ‘grammar’ inscribed in nature and by wisely using resources for the benefit of all, with respect for the beauty, finality and usefulness of every living being and its place in the ecosystem. Nature, in a word, is at our disposition and we are called to exercise a responsible stewardship over it. Yet so often we are driven by greed, and by the arrogance of dominion, possession, manipulation, and exploitation; we do not preserve nature; nor do we respect it or consider it a gracious gift which we must care for and set at the service of our brothers and sisters, including future generations.

An ecology realized within integral human development, in a word, is realized within the depth and breadth of the Christian understanding of creation and redemption—of the primacy of God as Creator and Redeemer.
Habits of presence and the generosity of creation. The Church contributes uniquely to ecology by forming human beings in what may be termed “habits of presence.” Forming such habits is the responsibility of every human being, and in a significant sense of every human institution. However, only the Church (as the Sacrament of Jesus Christ) in the end bears the capacity for realizing the full reality of presence.

The term “presence” comes from the present participle of the Latin praesse: “to be at hand, to be before (someone or something)” (prae: before; esse: to be). The Latin verb præsentare thus means “to place before or show”; and also “to “give as a gift” or “bestow.” Realization of a true ecology demands, as its informing conditio sine qua non, the genuine “presencing” of beings to each other, even as this presencing demands recognition of a giftedness, hence generosity, inherent in beings—all of them (in an analogous sense to be indicated below). An adequate ecology, in other words, presupposes a capacity in beings for relating to each other first in terms of a generous and so far liberating presence of each to the other, rather than in terms of a tendency to destroy or distort.

How are we to understand the claim of an original generosity in beings, such that we can speak reasonably of an integrated human and natural ecological community? What accounts for the obvious fact of the vast breakdown of community, and thus the lack of generosity in beings? Finally, what is the place of use or instrumentalization in the relations among beings? Under what conditions can use be legitimately said to extend or deepen rather than distort or undermine a presence meant to be generous?

I. Fundamental Principles

1. Goodness of creation. Every being is good because it is created. To be created is to be loved into existence by God. Every creature is thus good in itself, both because it is loved by God and because, as a participant in this love of God for it, each creature also loves itself. Because all creatures share in this common love of God for all of them and each of them, all creatures are primitively constituted as a community. Each being, in a principled albeit proportionate (analogical) way, is in its root meaning a gift.

2. Presence. Creation is a gratuitous act. God acts not out of need, but for the sake of those he creates. Creatures share by virtue of their very existence (esse) in this gratuitousness of God. It is this gratuitousness that establishes beings as good in themselves. As Joseph Ratzinger put it in an early book, creatures are good and true in their original givenness qua being (bonum et verum qua ens). This is the authentic view of Christianity, which prevailed throughout the pre-modern period. It is the view expressed by Aquinas in his “transcendental” understanding of being as inherently true and good (and beautiful). It is the ground for affirming the principle of an original giftedness and generosity among all creatures.

The notion that the truth and goodness of things is first given demands from the human being what is the primarily contemplative act of “letting be” (R. Spaemann) It is this primary act of letting be that establishes the genuine presence of one being to others. This presence is not a matter of passive receptivity. It is a matter rather of actively (generously) “seeing” other beings as they are in themselves, in their truth and goodness as naturally given. This contrasts
with what Ratzinger identifies as the modern view, according to which beings are true and good only qua subject to human intervention (verum et bonum quia factum/faciendum). (Ratzinger here is not denying the legitimate sense in which human beings do indeed contribute to making things true and good; rather he is affirming the priority of first accepting them in their original givenness as created. We will consider below how first accepting things, seeing/letting them be, conceived in the context of the generosity of creation, unfolds organically into intervention.)

3. **Analogy of being.** Christianity understands this original goodness inherent in beings, and what is an originally generous presence in their relations with each other, in an analogical and so far hierarchical way (from arkein: to lead or rule or order; and hieros: sacred, hence high-priestly). Only the human being among physical-creaturely beings bears a spiritual capacity—is informed by a spiritual soul. The human being thus bears a unique kind of truth and goodness, hence of dignity, in himself, as well as a unique capacity for generous presence to others as they are in themselves.

The hierarchy indicated here, which affirms the uniqueness of the human being among creatures, implies nothing negative regarding the ecological task. On the contrary, on the Christian understanding as indicated, all creatures bear a relation to God and so far a metaphysical interiority (not anthropological spirituality) qua created; and this suffices to establish every being of nature as inherently true and good and worthy of respect.

The hierarchy implied by analogy, then, does indeed entail rejection of what Benedict XVI calls ecocentrism or biocentrism. But rightly analogically conceived, this hierarchy bears an essentially positive meaning: the human person as an embodied spirit is meant, through his acts of knowing (intelligence) and loving (freedom), to deepen and amplify what is non-human beings’ own inherent giftedness: to magnify the generosity that is already inscribed in the “grammar” of the world of nature as created by God.

In light of this analogical hierarchy, it is essential that we speak of human beings as stewards (from the Old English stigweard, house guardian, housekeeper) of creation. It is also crucial that we speak of human beings alone as full and proper subjects of rights—as an analogical-hierarchical expression of the inherent respect due all creatures. As embodied spirit, only the human being images God in the proper sense, and is thus the only creature on earth willed by God simply for itself (Gaudium et Spes, 24).

*There are, then, in sum, two main principles to be affirmed in the face of the ecological task, in light of what we have termed analogical hierarchy. (a) The “transcendental” truth, goodness, and beauty of being: every being is true, good, and beautiful by virtue of creation, hence as given. Aquinas says, for example, that in a certain sense human knowledge is the “effect” of truth, rather than truth being simply the effect of knowledge. That is, all things are true (good, beautiful) in their original constitution, by virtue of their relation to the intelligent, loving Creator; it is not in our knowing or loving them that they first become true or good (cf. Joseph Pieper, The Truth of All Things). (b) The hierarchy of nature(s): on the ancient-classical (Thomistic) understanding, living beings are ensouled: they exist in a hierarchy of “interiority”*
indicated respectively-specifically by nutritive, sensible, and rational-spiritual activities. This understanding, then, affirms an analogically deeper “in-itselfness,” simultaneous with an analogically deeper capacity for relation (cognition and appetite), among the community of creaturely beings characterized by such a hierarchy.

4. **The place of human intervention: use and instrumentalization.** Here we need to recall again the gratuitousness hence generosity inherent in the act of creation. Being a creature means sharing in the creative generosity of God. The letting be that is the first act of the human creature involves *participation* in the generosity of God simultaneously with *recognizing other beings’ participation* in that generosity. Letting be is not a passively receptive act: it involves at root a readiness to foster the other’s own generosity, assisting in its expansion. Seeing other beings truly (because first “theoretically”: cf. J. Pieper) includes seeing them in their own goodness as apt for giving; all beings, in their givenness as good, seek to diffuse themselves (*bonum est diffusivum sui*). And, as Karol Wojtyla says, non-human beings bear by nature an aptness for being taken up into, and extended through, the exchanges of love among human beings.

(Thus, for example, trees in their original truth/goodness as given have a built-in capacity to give us shade and to provide wood for the fires that warm us. Friends provide all sorts of services for us, as a function of their inner goodness. God makes himself radically available for our requests for help.)

Things, then, in their original constitution as such, bear a generosity: their being as created involves their aptness for sharing with others, for being instruments in the service of other beings, human and non-human. The human being’s “use” of other beings as demanded by the order of creation extends other beings’ own inherent generosity, allowing them to have a wider and deeper presence in the world through the human being’s personal agency. But, again, this does not mean that any creature is ever purely and simply an instrument, for man’s use *ad libitum*. (This is an important implication of the principles of analogy and the transcendental truth and goodness of being: contra Descartes, there is nothing in the universe, no bit of matter, which is simply “dumb” stuff constituted entirely of mechanical force and empty movement. Rather, everything that exists bears signs of intelligent, creative love that renders it so far worthy of wonder and gratitude.)

5. **Criterion for good and bad use.** Generous presence is undermined when our actions do violence to others. Violence comes from *violare*, meaning to break or disregard, and thus to infringe upon or disturb. A generous presence thus becomes a violent presence when one’s “use” of the other does not begin organically from within the other’s truth/goodness as given. *How* we use others must be determined by *what* others are *in their original givenness*: what they are in their *nature* as originally given and ordered by God (nature: from *nascor*, be born). Violence, in a word, has its most basic beginning in activity that is *contra naturam.*

Generous in contrast to violent use of the other will thus involve interventions informed subjectively by the priority of listening and objectively by the criterion found in the nature of the other as given (created) and as apt for sharing itself.
To be sure, what #’s 4 and 5 concretely imply needs to be spelled out much further, in light of the principle of analogy, the relation between theory and praxis, between experience and experiment, and so on)

6. *Sin and the order of creation.* The order of creation is revealed in its completeness in the creation of Adam and Eve; and the violence that undermines the original generosity of beings as created takes its original form in the sin of Adam. “God freely confers being and life on everything that exists. Man and woman, created in his image and likeness (cf. *Gen.* 1: 26-27), are for that very reason called to be the visible sign and the effective instrument of divine gratuitousness in the garden where God has placed them as cultivators and custodians of the goods of creation” (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* [=CSDC], 26). A truly integrated ecology follows the order indicated here.

Note how this order is clarified in the narrative of the first sin (cf. *Gen* 3:1-24). In the words of CSDC: “Disobedience to God means hiding from his loving countenance and seeking to control one’s life and action in the world. Breaking the relation of communion with God causes a rupture in the internal unity of the human person, in the relations of communion between man and woman and of the harmonious relations between mankind and other creatures (cf. *GS*, 13). It is in this original estrangement that are to be sought the deepest roots of all the evils that afflict social relations between people, of all the situations in economic and political life that attack the dignity of the person, that assail justice and solidarity” (CSDC, 27).

Thus the rupture in the harmonious relations (or “original covenant”: cf. *CIV*, 50) between mankind and other creatures arises first as a consequence of sin: of mankind’s failure to listen to God. This is the original source for the false way of using creatures indicated above, for turning other beings “into mere objects, objects without interior worth” (Pope Francis). It is important, then, to take note of the order indicated in Adam’s sin. First, man fails to listen to or to obey God. Second, this failure to listen at once reveals itself within relations between human beings—between man and woman. Third, this failure to listen and this consequent disordered relation between man and woman entail a fracturing, mediated by the bodily extension of man and woman into the world, of the relation between humanity and the non-human creatures—which, fourth, by further implication unfolds into a rupture of harmony in the relations among non-human physical creatures themselves.

In light of the task of ecology, we should highlight here the significance of the insistence of Paul VI, Benedict XVI, and John Paul II on the link between family ethics and social ethics: how, for example, the difference between man and woman alone enables revelation of the full meaning and range of God’s love; and how the body participates in the order of love reflected in this unity-in-difference between them, via their personal-bodily union that is ordered toward fruitfulness. The spousal unity-in-difference and the body as an order apt for expressing procreative love play a unique and primary role in the communication of God’s creative love, and in the original-constitutive meaning of creaturely community.

The fourfold community indicated here in light of the sin of Adam, then, with its distinct hierarchical order, indicates the basic principle for the integration of human and natural
ecology. Sin in its original (dis-)order as disclosed in Adam signals the violence at the root of ecological disintegration. This of course does not rule out causes of disintegration other than sin—e.g., technical, institutional, etc. It means simply that sin is what at the deepest level disposes other causal agents toward violent “order” in the first place.

II. Cultural-Social Implications

Others will treat these implications in a sustained way, but it is important nevertheless to take note of what the foregoing comments regarding presence and generosity imply in principle for the cultural-institutional order.

1. The Church has emphasized consistently in its social teaching that *it has no technical solutions of its own to offer in social-economic matters*. This does not mean that the Church is neutral with respect to the range of such solutions expressed in the dominant institutions of our time. It means that its interest lies rather in supporting an understanding of the human being in terms of generous habits of presence and community, and in criticizing the breakdown in these that is due above all to sin. It is in this sense that the Church says that it is an “expert in humanity”: that, due to its nature as the ecclesial sacrament of Christ’s love, the Church has, by office, been granted wisdom in matters pertaining to that love. The Church thus does not intend to offer a “third” way, in the sense of a distinct technical alternative to dominant economic and political institutions of “right” and “left.” The Church intends rather to offer a distinct theological-anthropological vision and way of life that express “a set of *principles for reflection and criteria for judgment* and also *directives for action*, which are to be employed for the sake of transforming the disorders of poverty and injustice as they manifest in any of these institutions.”

Benedict XVI, with Paul VI, highlights “the global dimension of the social question” today, and the gravity and extent of our social problems, and points out in this connection how our “conscience [today] is simply invited to take note of technological possibilities,” (*CIV*, 75). Needless to say, the ameliorations of technology are indispensable in such circumstances. But Benedict insists, with Paul VI, that the social question remains even now “a radically anthropological question” (*CIV*, 75).

Pope Benedict says in *CIV* that “the exclusively binary model of market-plus-State is corrosive of society” (*CIV*, 39)—echoing what Pius XI had said in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) about the reduction of social order to “virtually only individuals and the State.” What Benedict means is that the logic of both the economy and the polity need to be integrated by and into “the logic of the unconditional gift” (37). Benedict recognizes that formation in the logic of gift is the primary responsibility of the institutions of civil society like the family, as well as more organic, intermediate civil communities. But he insists that the “spirit of gift” needs somehow to inform the logic of the economy and the polity as well. Indeed, it is noteworthy that *CIV* insists on the inclusion of gift—charity and communion and relation—in the logic of the academy as well (cf., e.g., *CIV*, 30, 31, 48, 52, 53, 54, 55).

In a word: when Benedict says that we must move beyond the binary logic of market-plus-state—and indeed, presuming to include here also the academy, we may say beyond the
trinary logic of market-plus-state-plus-academy in their prevalent forms—he means that we must integrate these logics as far as possible into the logic of gift, of gratuitousness and community, and seek to transform the dis-order caused by sin that obstructs such integration. I conclude, then, by indicating briefly what is meant by sin respectively in each institution, and the peculiar resistance posed to integral development in each case.

2. The idea of social or structural sin as defined in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is indispensable in the context of ecological concerns. CSDC emphasizes that such sins are rooted in personal sin, which are then over time consolidated, conditioning human conduct in ways that go well beyond the actions and brief life span of individuals. These sins interfere with the development of peoples, and the slow pace of such development must therefore be judged in the light of such sins. CSDC focuses these sins in terms of the desire for profit, on the one hand, and the thirst for power, on the other.

3. Regarding profit and the logic of the market economy: the legitimacy of profit is to be acknowledged, even as profit must be understood from the beginning inside the call for integral human development and the principle of universality.

   *This demands a radical re-reading of the root meaning of poverty and wealth.* On the view developed by Paul VI and Benedict XVI, and indicated above in terms of generous presence and community, poverty consists at root in a lack of those relationships that most intimately characterize one’s being: relationships with God and a family born of a monogamous union of a man and a woman; and the local communities most immediately tied to these relationships. Poverty/wealth consist first in poverty/wealth of love as embodied in these communities (cf. CIV, 53). To be sure, these “constitutive” relations (cf. CSDC, 109; 37) themselves include/demand sufficient material wealth—housing, food, and the like—and efforts to insure this material wealth are essential to integral human development. But efforts—for example, on the part of the market and the government—to redress the problem of poverty must be set within and measured against the need for every human being to be loved and to love, in relation above all to God through a family and local community. In this connection, efforts to overcome poverty should *as far as possible be expressions of community life* (e.g., families, local and religious communities, etc.). Indeed, we finally understand poverty and wealth properly only in terms of the God who, being rich, took on our poverty, so that we might become rich with his poverty (*EG*, 198).

   *Work:* Work is at root for the sake of producing something good. Work is not a mere instrument in the pursuit of a profit abstracted from the common good—from the realization of what is “transcendentally” true and good and beautiful. It is always, as an activity and in its product, meant to be ordered by and into the good of community—with God, other human beings, and all of creation.

4. Regarding power and the logic of the liberal-democratic polity: The human rights around which the modern state is ordered are inherently good, but such rights, like the profit characteristic of the liberal market, must be integrated into the logic of integral human development. Rights are to be understood from the beginning in terms of *one's nature (and natural-theological body) as created by God*: from inside a freedom ordered toward and by
gift; and thus from inside responsibility for fulfilling one’s naturally given relationality to God, family, and all other human beings and the whole of creation. We must therefore critically evaluate the rights typically conceived in liberal societies as simple immunities from coercion—and as so far abstracted from such originally-naturally given relations. Rights are indeed immunities, but only as tied intrinsically to nature and responsibility to God and others.

Rights, in sum, are not to be understood in the first instance as matters of power (of one person or group over against others, as implied by the primacy of the “negative” claim of immunity), but of positive relation to God and others and to the good of all. Governments in liberal societies need thus, so far, to integrate into their “coercive” purpose the “pedagogical” purpose affirmed in ancient-Christian thought (Cf. Aquinas).

5. Regarding the logic of the disciplines of the modern academy, especially science and technology. The achievements of modern science are abundant. But, like profit in the liberal market and rights in the liberal state, they are highly ambiguous. Modern science is said to be born in Francis Bacon’s dictum that “knowledge and power are one.” The power and control sought in knowledge are in principle good. But they need to be ordered in terms of the call to integral human development. It is often said that modern science has its origin in the Christian doctrine of creation: it is this doctrine that secures the legitimate autonomy of the creature and hence the laws or order innate to the creature. But this claim is also ambiguous. The primacy of power as conceived and exercised in modern science typically overlooks the meaning of creation in its original and rightful understanding: that things are true and good qua given. It is only through the primacy of listening to and seeing things as they are naturally given (by God) that we learn how truly to deepen and extend the generosity inherent in them as creatures.

This in no way implies rejection of the academy and its disciplines. On the contrary, it means, in the words of Benedict XVI, that charity is not to be understood merely as “an added extra, like an appendix to work already concluded in each of the various disciplines: [rather,] it engages them in dialogue from the very beginning” (CIV, 30). Charity must animate the sciences “in a harmonious interdisciplinary whole, marked by unity and distinction” (CIV, 31). The Church’s social doctrine “has ‘an important interdisciplinary dimension’” (CIV, 31, citing Centesimus Annus, 59). “The excessive segmentation of knowledge, the rejection of metaphysics by the human sciences . . . are damaging . . . to the development of peoples, because these things make it harder to see the integral good of man in its various dimensions” (CIV, 31). Pope Paul VI said that “the world is in trouble because of the lack of thinking” (Populorum Progressio, 85). Benedict comments: Paul was suggesting that “a new trajectory of thinking is needed in order to arrive at a better understanding of the implications of our being one family . . . . Thinking of this kind requires a deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation” (CIV, 53).

Section II leaves unaddressed massive concrete issues of great urgency. My purpose, however, is limited to drawing into relief a single but important point: it is the anthropology and way of life of modern Western liberal societies, reflected in and brought about by these societies’ prevalent views of poverty and wealth, work, profit, freedom and rights,
knowledge and technological science, and nature and the human body—and above all of God as Creator—that most obstruct the ecology that the Church calls for today. There will be no integration of human and natural ecology, no integral human development, without genuine transformation of these views (which is different from either simple rejection or simple embrace—controlled through added moral correction or coercive measures by the state). As CSDC puts it: “Serious ecological problems call for an effective change of mentality leading to the adoption of new lifestyles, in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of the common good are the [key] factors. . . . (486). My proposal is that there is an interlocking set of basic assumptions in liberal societies that enables us to see a deep connection among the vast range of social-ecological problems that we face, all tied to the breakdown of creaturely community, all requiring the opening of “the path of man to God, Creator of heaven and earth” (CSDC, 487). What the ecological task elicits from us today, we may say, is renewed fidelity to the vocation to sanctity, now deepened in light of the Second Vatican Council to include more fully and explicitly mission to the world and cosmos in their entirety.

Farmer-writer Wendell Berry provides a concrete summary indication of how the various problematic features of our culture come together as common manifestations of a breakdown of community—or, we might say, of the dis-integration of human and natural ecology:

“Mostly, we do not speak of our society as disintegrating. We would prefer not to call what we are experiencing social disintegration. But we are endlessly preoccupied with the symptoms: divorce, venereal disease, murder, rape, debt, bankruptcy, pornography, soil loss, teenage pregnancy, fatherless children, motherless children, child suicide, public child-care, retirement homes, nursing homes, toxic waste, soil and water and air pollution, government secrecy, government lying, government crime, civil violence, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, abortion as ’birth control,’ the explosion of garbage, hopeless poverty, unemployment, unearned income. We know the symptoms well enough. All the plagues of our time are symptoms of a general disintegration.

We are capable, really, only of the forcible integration of centralization—economic, political, military, and educational—and always at the cost of social and cultural disintegration.

That we prefer to deal piecemeal with the problems of disintegration keeps them ‘newsworthy’ and profitable to the sellers of cures. To see them as . . . the symptoms of a greater problem would require hard thought, a change of heart, and a search for the fundamental causes” (The Hidden Wound [North Point Press: New York, 1989], 131-132).