

Environment and Evangelization

Ricardo Simmonds

As the world awaits the publication of the Church's first encyclical on ecology there is a growing crescendo of expectations and confusion. Some are prophesying the coming of a 'climate change encyclical' while others have undermined the Pope's authority before having heard what he will say. Much of the misunderstanding stems from asking the question of *what* the Church will say before understanding *why* the Church cares about ecology in the first place. Why is Pope Francis talking about the environment and why now? One way of answering this question is to explore an important concept in the Church's tradition: the signs of the times.

The signs of the times

The Church has often relied on the 'signs of the times' to discern its apostolic efforts for different epochs. On his deathbed Saint John XXIII said: "*the moment has come to discern the signs of the times, to seize the opportunity and to look far ahead.*"¹ The Vatican Council which he convoked stated that, "*to carry out such a task [evangelization], the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.*"² Pope Francis declined to offer "*a detailed and complete analysis of contemporary reality*" in *Evangelii gaudium* but said that an "*ever watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times*" is "*a grave responsibility*" and "*that whenever we attempt to read the signs of the times it is helpful to listen to young people and the elderly.*"³

There is one elderly man who recently spelled out the signs of the times with clarity and precision. In an often-overlooked catechesis entitled "*How to speak about God in our times?*" delivered just before his resignation, Pope Benedict XVI said that "*we must take care to perceive the signs of the times in our epoch, namely, to identify the potentials, aspirations and obstacles we encounter in today's culture and in particular the wish for authenticity, the yearning for transcendence, and concern to safeguard Creation and to communicate fearlessly the response that faith in God offers.*"⁴

Before theorizing about these specific 'signs' and their relationships I would rather like to begin a reflection based on experience. As a religious brother, for almost a decade now my main mission in life has been to share the Catholic faith to American college students from every walk of life. I have tried every trick in the book and racked my brain thinking about how the Gospel can reach today's millennials. Since I myself am a millennial, one fruitful point for reflection and action has been to distill the elements essential in my own spiritual journey and to apply them apostolically. By my first year of college I had become a hedonistic, new age Buddhist desperately searching for God and meaning. I eventually converted to Catholicism on a mission trip to Peru: serving the poor in nature and surrounded by group of friends in Christ. I then founded *Creatio*, a Catholic environmental non-profit that has promoted dozens of mission trips, and most lately walking

¹ Pro Ecclesia Vol 22-N3: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology, 288.

² Gaudium et spes (GS), 4.

³ Evangelii gaudium (EG) 51;108.

⁴ Benedict XVI, Catechesis, November 28, 2012.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20121128_en.html

pilgrimages, for Catholics and non-Catholic alike. These activities have been apostolically very fruitful and borne numerous conversions and vocations, in part because they intuitively respond to the signs of the times iterated by Pope Benedict XVI⁵.

While anecdotal evidence and assent to authority may be sufficient to acknowledge that the Pope emeritus has hit the mark, we can still push further and ask ourselves yet again: *why* are these, especially creation, the signs of *our* times? There are probably many answers⁶ but I will limit myself to three important concepts. The theological category of reconciliation is the backbone around which philosophy and Christology ‘enflesh’ reality, revealing the heart of the matter. Finally, as a way of conclusion, De Lubac’s ecclesiological concept of ‘spiritual worldliness’ connects ecology to evangelization.

Reconciliation Theology

I would like to return briefly to the experience of guiding millennial youth on environmental projects nestled under the glaciers of Peru or walking for miles as pilgrims amidst the beauty of New Mexico’s deserts. Many college students sign up for *Creatio* trips in the name of altruistic motivations but seem more attracted to ‘experiences’ they want for themselves, such as the mystical backdrop of Machu Picchu or landscapes that evoke boundless freedom. In post-trip evaluations it becomes apparent that the ‘selfie’ moment students sought often pale in comparison with the hard and beautiful lessons they learn from nature, poverty and their contact with reality. Gratitude tends to be a common experience they take home accompanied by a deeper respect for creation, faith and friendship.

There is a reciprocity in the relationship between mankind and nature⁷. Contact with creation can awaken important human and universal inner chords that have the capacity to generate unity among peoples. As Pope Francis said in his inaugural mass, “*The vocation of being a “protector”, however, is not just something involving us Christians alone; it also has a prior dimension which is simply human, involving everyone. It means protecting all creation, the beauty of the created world, as the Book of Genesis tells us and as Saint Francis of Assisi showed us...*”⁸. It seems that the environment is one thing that many peoples amidst this hyper-pluralized and globalized world can agree to care about (or care to agree about).

Built upon this fundamental anthropological capacity for relationship, the theology of reconciliation serves as an important articulation of Catholic environmental thought. In the encyclical *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, John Paul II explained that it is legitimate to relate the

⁵ All trips involve authenticity, transcendence, creation and announcing the Gospel in different ways. Serving the poor offers an overwhelming opportunity for transcendence and communion with God and others (Mt. 25), authenticity is discovered in a genuine community of friends in Christ and being immersed in the beauty of nature instills the experience of love for creation. In walking pilgrimages the experience of poverty is perhaps even deeper as one becomes the poor person (sore, hungry and thirsty) who is cared for by others. Finally, one essential aspect in mission trips and pilgrimages is the presence of intentional, young apostles who announce the Gospel authentically and fearlessly within the community.

⁶ I would love to indulge in so many key categories that illuminate this question such as Francis’ “anthropological immanence”, Voegelin’s gnosticism, Ratzinger’s Trinitarian communion theology, De Lubac’s spiritual worldliness, millennial sociology, the narcissist epidemic and others.

⁷ See Benedict XVI, Address for the World Day of Peace, 2010.

⁸ Pope Francis, Inaugural Mass, 2013. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html

“whole mission of Christ... as the one who reconciles” and that the “four reconciliations which repair the four fundamental rifts; reconciliation of man with God, with self, with the brethren and with the whole of creation,” must be a stimulus “which ideally might become the lever for a true transformation of society.”⁹ Reconciliation theology rests on the Trinitarian understanding that human beings are called to a vocation of relationship, at four structured and interrelated levels: with God, oneself, others and creation. Sin, original and the current sins of mankind, causes profound ruptures at all these dimensions of relationship and explain the broken and suffering world we live in. Jesus came to restore this harmonious relationship first between human beings and God, by showing his face. Once reconciled with God a person can be his or her true self, and consequently reconciled individuals can create a harmonious society. A reconciled society in turn projects love and respect, rather than greed and destruction, onto creation. The promise of reconciliation runs on the lifeblood of mercy: a tender forgiveness that can take sin, evil and rupture and transform it into love.

My suggestion is that the care for creation is a sign of *our* times because mankind, in its long-winded effort to rebuild Babel, has been able to disagree on all other, and most important, aspects of relationship. The theological disagreements of late Scholasticism, followed by the Reformation and religious wars since then gave men the idea that God was a source of rupture rather than unity, sealing the rupture with God.¹⁰ Since the Enlightenment up to our virulent culture wars we have been able to disagree on perhaps every aspect of the definition of the human being and the correct conformation of society – with the most horrific expressions seen in the atrocities throughout the 20th century perpetrated in the name of enlightened economic, political and social ideals. Now, the only reconciliation within reach seems to be the most basic one with creation¹¹. While there still are to this day significant disagreements and disillusion in the environmental field, there are also great hopes and real achievements; and hope means a lot in a broken, ruptured world¹². In it’s environmental key, this theology of reconciliation simply says that the state of the natural world is a reflection of what human beings are themselves¹³, and if we want to save the planet we better start living out the invitation to mercy and tenderness. How, in practice, do we do this?

Libertine atheism

The logic of reconciliation indicates that the love we want to give creation comes from God. God is the source of mercy. What is our relationship with God like these days? ‘Not great’ according to Uruguayan intellectual Alberto Methol Ferré, who says the world is cast under the spell of *libertine atheism*. Along with a group of Latin American intellectuals, Ferré exerted an important

⁹ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et poenitentia*, 7; 26; 3

¹⁰ See for example Brad Gregory, “*The Unintended Reformation*”, Belknap Press, 2012.

¹¹ To a certain extent, reconciliation with creation is the easiest and most visible reconciliation to achieve. Creation, minus the human and angelic element, consists of less complicated matter - there are no wills, no intelligence, no freedom or forgiveness involved on creation’s end. As long as we love and treat the environment correctly it will ‘love us right back’. Certainly God does love us in the truest sense with an overabundance of love, will, freedom etc. regardless of our response, but the acceptance of His love requires that we place our life in his hands, and that is so hard for us enlightened immantists.

¹² Debates about climate change are an excellent example of how the environment becomes a placeholder for the debate of many other ideas, longings and expectations. See Michael Hulme “*Why we disagree about climate change*”, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

¹³ This is true yet somewhat incomplete, since there is a dimension of creation that depends on God directly regardless of human intervention and action. Nonetheless, it is true that the wounds of creation mirror our human wounds, or as Vatican II puts it: “*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.*” (GS 10)

influence on the Latin American Bishop Conferences (CELAM) and was a close friend of Cardinal Bergoglio¹⁴. Ferré identified libertine atheism as the greatest enemy of faith in our times: *"one cannot redeem libertine atheism's kernel of truth with an argumentative or dialectical procedure; much less can one do so by setting up prohibitions, raising alarms, dictating abstract rules. Libertine atheism is not an ideology, it is a practice. A practice must be opposed with another practice; a self-aware practice, of course, which means one that is equipped intellectually. Historically the Church is the only subject present on the stage of the contemporary world that can confront libertine atheism. To my mind only the Church is truly post-modern."*

Ferré is not only implying that ideological argumentation misses the mark in addressing libertine atheism, it misses the mark in responding to libertine culture at large. Beauty is that *kernel of truth* that libertine atheism carries within itself and only a beautiful and compelling alternative can redeem it. The magisterium has suggested this already: the Church "grows by attraction"¹⁵. Ferré's point also speaks to what studies on millennials¹⁶ have revealed for a while: they don't really read, reality is apprehended through symbolic and visual language and discursive reasoning is less important. The Church must therefore present an alternative *practice* of Christian life, one that is beautiful, joyful, visible, incarnate, explained and taught by personal example and filled with symbols, signs and gestures. The direction in which Ferré took this insight was to promote popular piety. For example, the Puebla Document hailed "*popular piety*" as having "*the capacity of expressing faith in a complete language that overcomes rationalisms (song, image, gesture, color, dance); this Faith situated in time (feasts) and place (sanctuaries and temples).*"¹⁷ Cardinal Bergoglio was a great advocate for popular piety and has continued to do so in his pontifical magisterium.

However, for the North American Church, there seem to be very few autochthonous frames of reference for popular piety, and I believe this is one of America's greatest poverties.¹⁸ Along with developing these traditions, there may be other, more accessible and congenial ways for Americans to express their faith in a 'complete language situated in time and place'. Caring for and being in creation, which has deep roots in America's historical conscience, can be one form of embodying the faith and making it beautiful and accessible. Creation could become (along with the arts) a

¹⁴ See Alver Metalli, "El Papa y el Filosofo", 2010. This may perhaps be an overstatement of Ferré's actual influence; nonetheless he was part of a circle of Catholic intellectuals who had an impact on Latin American Bishops, and his expertise was popular piety. The idea of libertine atheism was taken from philosopher Augusto del Noce and applied to the Latin American reality by Methol Ferré.

¹⁵ EG 15; Benedict XVI, Homily at Mass for the Opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (13 May 2007), Aparecida, Brazil: AAS 99 (2007), 437.

¹⁶ David Kinaman, "You lost me", Baker Books, 2011.

¹⁷ Jorge Mario Bergoglio, "*El Verdadero Poder es el Servicio*", 314; Puebla 454.

¹⁸ One exception is to be found in the Hispanic culture of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado, fruit of the northernmost Franciscan missions of the 18th century. Apart from this I know of no other autochthonous American Catholic cultural synthesis. There are imported impositions from other cultures that have died due to the assimilation of Catholics into Anglo-Protestant mainstream. The closest thing may be the popular attendance of Catholics during Ash Wednesday. Other Catholics have identified the importance of popular piety for American Catholicism; for examples see the efforts of Fr. Ivan Illich <http://solidarityhall.org/ivan-illichs-politics-of-carnival/> and the devotion to San Gennaro in New York <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2013/the-miracles-of-san-gennaro>. The problem of public expression of faith in the USA is not restricted to popular piety either. The arts are an entire field that struggles to find true Catholic expression as described in literature by Dana Gioia and in film by Barbara Nicolosi. In turn, these two authors offer Catholic alternatives that seek to evangelize the synthesis of American culture true to Francis' style and approach and their work is a beacon of hope. Read Gioia <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/12/the-catholic-writer-today> and Nicolosi <http://churchofthemassee.blogspot.com/2014/04/a-christian-cinema-interview-with-av.html>

doorway through which libertine atheism's kernel of truth, beauty, would find the evangelical expression that points people to heaven. Hikes, outdoor masses, pilgrimages, environmental projects, all infused with Christian meaning, are some examples of concrete activities. However, creation also has something to offer that transcends the attraction of beauty.

Neodocetism

While Bergoglio was joining popular processions and 'touching' statues as the renowned Jesuit rector in Argentina, he also converted the grounds of the seminary into a farm where "students collected honey, milked cows, and cleaned out the pigsty [and] where they often met the rector in his plastic boots"¹⁹. For Bergoglio caring for the farm meant learning humility, being in touch with the poor, feeding the hungry and finding an ideal space for prayer and contemplation – a place where the word of the Gospel became flesh. The first retreat Bergoglio delivered when he emerged from his 'exile' in Cordoba was entitled "Prayer in the Flesh" in which he spoke of the ill of an "enlightened neodocetism" that "denies the flesh of Jesus"²⁰. This modern heresy especially affects the ecclesial elites, and consists in the inability to embrace failure through a scandalized and unaccepting reaction to sin and suffering. Its error consists in the disassociation of one's personal failures to the suffering of Jesus on the Cross. True Christians are "able to incorporate in their daily lives the conviction that Jesus Christ is alive in their midst", especially among suffering, sin and failure. While neodocetism surgically removes corporeality from Christian daily life, an incarnational spirituality attempts to bring our human flesh in contact with everyday reality.

This brings us full circle back to creation. Constant contact with nature can teach us how to suffer – a difficult lesson in itself and a long lost art for many contemporary youth infected with the 'narcissist epidemic'²¹. Our own bodies and nature are the incarnate arena in which we can embrace the flesh of Christ on a daily basis. As in Bergoglio's farm, care for creation serves as a locus for us to live 'a spirituality of the flesh'. I often find on mission trips and pilgrimages that I need to do very little to evangelize; reality takes care of it. Working on the land, eating with the poor and walking for hours through blisters can open us to the voice of Jesus, who did all those things himself.

The benefits of this neodocetic antidote can also transcend our own self-improvement and bring healing to the 'flesh' of the created world around us. The seriousness and success of the Church's environmental and social projects will be a key indicator of Christian credibility.²² This is why *Creatio* is investing in long-term environmental projects at specific locations such as Ayaviri in Peru, where we return time and again to the same location. Our goal in Ayaviri is to demonstrate through works that the integral Christian vision of reality (our inspired intellectual equipment), brings *de facto* improvements upon the lives of villagers and the environment.

¹⁹ Ivreigh, Austen (2014-11-25). "The Great Reformer: Francis and the Making of a Radical Pope" (Kindle Locations 3490-3491). Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

²⁰ Bergoglio, Jorge Mario "Mente abierta, Corazon creyente" p. 226. Docetism was a heresy that affirmed that Jesus was not true man: his body was not real but a mere apparition.

²¹ Aaron Kheriarty, "The Era of the Narcissist", First Things, 2/16/10. <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2010/02/the-era-of-the-narcissist>.

²² "the Gospel of the marginalized is where our credibility is at stake, is discovered and is revealed!"

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150215_omelia-nuovi-cardinali.html

Conclusion

I have said plenty about why the environment is important for evangelization, but very little about evangelization itself. A clear call for the Church's missionary activity was pronounced by Vatican II and has been echoed loudly over time by numerous Pope's, Bishops, lay movements and the laity. It is evangelization, the act of going out, that liberates the Church from what Henri De Lubac has called the greatest danger for the Church: 'spiritual worldliness'. For its own good the Church must "*go forth, to go forth! For me this is as the kernel of evangelization. And to go forth means to come, namely, to closeness.*"²³ The act of evangelization in association with creation makes a 'powerful combo' that can captivate the world of today. I believe the impact of Francis' encyclical will be a proof of this.

Inspired by the magisterium, I want to conclude by sharing a practice that integrates evangelization, popular piety and the environment: the "Camino de Chimayo." Over the last year, *Creatio* has led six different groups of youth and adults (both Catholics and not) for weeklong walking pilgrimages in New Mexico. The dream is that the Camino de Chimayo will become the North American equivalent of the "Camino de Santiago" in Spain (a century old path walked by pilgrims across northern Spain averaging 10-15 miles a day for 10 days to a month or more).

Central to the probable success of the Camino de Chimayo is its history and location. In the heart of America, the region of Northern New Mexico from Albuquerque to the San Luis Valley in Colorado reflects a unique living synthesis of faith and culture. There, people are proudly American while at the same time very comfortable speaking Spanish. Racially they are Hispanic mestizos (not Mexican and not Anglos). Most importantly, their identity lies in being Catholic – this is reflected in the celebration of saint feasts, processions, pilgrimages and many other traditions. Popular piety runs through the veins of this American Catholic people.

Furthermore, this entire area is surrounded by incredible natural and supernatural beauty. The natural beauty is seen in the high forests and snow capped peaks of Taos, as well as the fertile plains and rivers flowing through Española and Santa Fe, to the spectacular desert expanding to the West of Abiquiu. To walk 12 to 20 miles a day in this area is to experience freedom surrounded by beauty and to be physically (it's a workout!) connected to earth, wind, fire and water. The natural scenery has nothing to envy Northern Spain, and the Franciscan evangelization of the 18th century guaranteed a chain of settlements within a day's walking distance of each other.

If that were not enough, God has blessed this natural and human beauty with a supernatural gift in the miracle of Chimayo. In the early 19th century a poor farmer found a cross buried in his field. After removing the cross repeatedly only to find it miraculously returned to the same spot every morning, the Bishop decided to build a sanctuary around the blessed piece of land where to this day thousands of pilgrims (mostly locals) visit the Santuario every year. The Santuario contains the history, tradition and divine blessing of a true pilgrim's destination. God blessed this land, and it is a treasure waiting to be found. Pope Francis asked everyone to go on pilgrimage for the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Let's start walking!

²³ <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/full-text-of-pope-francis-q-amp-a-with-seminarians-in-rome>

