



Chapter V

The Family - Human Ecology

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Point: The purpose of this chapter is to show the connection between the Church's teachings on the environment and the Church's teachings on sexuality. Catholics have a responsibility to promote the dignity of both. This chapter will look closely at the following points:

- Contemporary society often forces people into a false choice: the environment or the family. As usual, the Church refuses to choose one and reject another, and instead stands behind both the environment and the family. We are called to do the same.
- Catholic environmentalism and Catholic sexual ethics have a common starting point. Both have an inherent natural order which should be protected against the toxic effects of contemporary society.
- The contemporary world is full of sexual pollution. Sexual sin, especially the artificial nature of sins like pornography and contraception, have a corrosive effect on the family.

First Section: The Ecology of the Family

There are perhaps no two dangers which pose a greater threat to human society than (1) the decline of the natural environment and (2) the corrosion of the nuclear family. The problem, unfortunately, is that people rarely fight both problems. Instead, they feel as though they have to choose one cause or the other. The last chapter of this Bible study was about the importance of the natural environment. This chapter is about the importance of family. The two causes are connected, and faithful Catholics should fight for both of them. In fact, the order of the global ecosystem should encourage us to promote the order of the ecosystem of the family.

Before we begin our study on the family, we must recognize that there is no perfect family. Imperfect families are still good families, and we don't need to come from a certain kind of family to believe in the family's importance. If you have ever felt sorrowful or ashamed about your own imperfect family, you might take some consolation in Scripture. From Genesis through Revelation, the Bible contains stories of one dysfunctional family after another. To start, consider the story of Adam and Eve, a story in which Eve lies to her husband.¹ Read a little bit further, and you will encounter the stories of Noah and Abraham, both of whom were unfaithful to their wives.² Just a little bit further and you'll find the story of King David, a man who lusted after his servant's wife, adulterated with her, then had his servant killed.³ It's clear that the Old Testament is full of imperfect Israelite families, but it's also clear that God guided and favored the Israelites despite their imperfection. Again, imperfect families are still good families, and it's worth fighting for them despite their imperfection. Just like the environment, the family is under threat.

¹ Genesis 2

² Genesis 6-9

³ 2 Samuel 11

The Catholic Church unwaveringly maintains the importance of both the environment and the family. Unfortunately, contemporary society forces people to choose between the two. The false divide says that if someone believes in the dignity of the environment, they cannot also believe in the dignity of the nuclear family. On the flip side, if someone believes in the importance of the family, they would be inconsistent to promote environmental stewardship. This false divide is present in many situations and in many countries, but some people think it is particularly true of the left-right divide in American politics. Philosopher Benjamin Wiker caricatures the situation as follows:

In regard to the environment, the Left sees those on the Right as self-righteous, woman-hating, Bible-thumping, voracious consumer-capitalists, ripping up millions of trees and throwing down endless miles of pavement so they can tank around from mall to mall in their gas-guzzling SUVs, spewing fast-food trash out of their tinted electric windows while singing "God Bless America" and blithely plowing over innocent animals who haplessly wander onto their asphalt paths.

The Right sees the Left as atheistic, human-hating, earth-worshipping socialists who eat funny food, drive politically correct toy cars, and spend their time saving whales and nearly invisible and obscure creek creatures, while they heartily support abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, and even the collective extermination of the human species for the sake of saving the natural environment...⁴

Obviously, the situation is not so simple as Wiker's caricature, and this chapter does not intend to make any claims about American political parties. That said, the world offers us the question: "Are you for the environment or the family?" As usual, the Catholic Church encourages

⁴ Wiker, Benjamin. *In Defense of Nature*. 6-7.

a single response: “Yes.” For the Catholic Church, there is a profound unity between the two camps. Both sides seek to protect and restore a natural order against the toxins of contemporary society. In fact, the arguments are so similar that the word “ecology” is frequently ascribed to both. As John Paul II says, “The 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.”⁵

Here, once again, we have a case in which the world forces a choice between two goods: the good of the environment and the good of the family. Believing in the dignity of the both is quite rare. People who do so often feel uncomfortable in any political party. Thus, it’s important for us to remember that the Gospel was never supposed to be easy. Recall Christ’s words from Matthew:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.⁶

When it comes to the family, the environment, and Catholicism, one gets the feel of the narrow road. It’s very easy to protect either the family or the environment, but it’s very difficult to protect both. On the one hand, there are many who advocate for the dignity of the family but leave behind all concern for the environment. Here one might think of Wiker’s first group in the example above. On the other hand, there are many who advocate for the environment but leave behind traditional family values, similar to Wiker’s second group.

⁵ *Centesimus Annus*. 39.

⁶ Matthew 7:13-14

Both groups have millions of members, but both seem a touch off base. There is a third way! You can fight for both! The way is narrow and those who find it are few, but the Church encourages us to travel by it.

Second Section: Two Passages, One Morality

When it comes to the family and the environment, Catholic Church finds itself in a paradoxical position: to be Catholic requires one to be both pro-family and pro-environment. And, also as usual, the Church's reasoning for this position is "radical." That is, it requires one to go to the roots of things.

At their roots, there is a remarkable similarity between the arguments which motivate both Catholic environmentalism and the Catholic Church's teaching on the family and sexuality. Let's take environmentalism first. Environmentalists understand that there is an exquisite and fragile balance to the natural order. Ecosystems, atmospheres, and the like are delicate things, things which humanity has only begun to understand, and things which ought to be approached with a sense of reverence. A lack of reverence towards the environment results in serious and long-term damage. Now let's consider the family and sexual morality. Pro-family people have a deep appreciation for the exquisite but similarly fragile nature of the sexual order, recognizing that even a small deviation in sexual morality can throw off the family unit and have reverberating effects throughout the whole of human society. Thus, the family should be approached with a similarly reverential attitude, an attitude which seeks to conserve a similarly fragile human ecology. As you can see, both environmentalists and those who seek to protect the family

approach their issue in a similar manner.⁷ Both the environment and the family possess a complex natural order. That order ought to be respected, and a lack of respect for that order will result in lasting negative effects.

You might think that some environmentalists believe in a natural but not a moral ecology, while others believe in a moral ecology but not a natural one. Very few take the position that both exist. This, of course, is the Catholic position. The world attempts to force a choice, but the Church refuses to choose. Instead, the Church calls each side to recognize the whole picture. Those who recognize the dignity of the natural order should also recognize the dignity of human nature, and those who recognize the dignity of human nature should also recognize the dignity of the natural order. This is not only the position of the Catholic Church; it is also the position of the ancient Israelites.

Let's take a look at two passages which exemplify the Israelite attitude towards the environment and the family. First, the environment:

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm and said:
Who is this who darkens counsel
with words of ignorance?
Gird up your loins now, like a man;
I will question you, and you tell me the answers!
Where were you when I founded the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its size? Surely you know?
Who stretched out the measuring line for it?
Into what were its pedestals sunk,

⁷ For the philosophical types, and for leaders with more intellectually inclined students, it may be helpful to draw a connection between Francis Bacon and Nicolo Machiavelli, briefly illustrating the philosophical underpinnings of a mechanistic attitude towards the human person/body, an attitude which leaves both human nature and nature itself open to endless manipulation. One of the driving themes of this study is to show the connection between manipulation of the environment and manipulation of the family.

and who laid its cornerstone,
While the morning stars sang together
and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
Who shut within doors the sea,
when it burst forth from the womb,
When I made the clouds its garment
and thick darkness its swaddling bands?⁸

This passage comes from the book of Job. As part of the Old Testament wisdom literature, the book's primary value comes from the wisdom, not necessarily the historical information, that it conveys. In a manner that is quite common in Old Testament, the grandeur of creation is seen as a manifestation of the creative power of God. For those not familiar with Job, it depicts the story of a man who trusts the Lord above all things. In this story, God allows Job to go through a series of extreme hardships in order to test his faith. After a particularly difficult hardship, Job begins to falter, questioning the wisdom of God. God responds by using the beauty of creation as a demonstration of divine providence and wisdom.⁹ Job leaves this conversation with a profound sense of wonder and awe. After all, any God who could create something so marvelous as our planet is great indeed.

Like we discussed in the last chapter, the Israelites had a profound sense of wonder and awe at creation. They respected the complexity of creation in the same manner that contemporary biologists respect for the complexity of an ecosystem. In this way, there is a profound connection between the contemporary biologist and the ancient Israelite: both have a deep sense of *reverence* for the environment. That said, the reverence of the Israelites extended to the family as

⁸ Job 38: 1-9

⁹ If you're not familiar with the book of Job, please take a few minutes to familiarize yourself with the basic storyline.

well. For the Israelites, the family was also seen as a part of God's creative design and were also an occasion for wonder and awe:

Blessed are all who fear the LORD,
and who walk in his ways.
What your hands provide you will enjoy;
you will be blessed and prosper:
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine
within your home,
Your children like young olive plants
around your table.
Just so will the man be blessed
who fears the LORD.
May the LORD bless you from Zion;
may you see Jerusalem's prosperity
all the days of your life,
and live to see your children's children.
Peace upon Israel!¹⁰

Psalms 128 is a psalm of blessing,¹¹ and it reveals to us two things. First, if we can get past the humorous nature of children being likened to plants, let us note that the Israelite blessings often included the blessings of family right alongside the blessings of the earth.¹² Second, the blessing of children is associated with the land of "Zion," another name for the promised land of Israel, a land "flowing with milk and honey," and extolled for its natural beauty. Once again, if we take both Job 38 and Psalm 128 together, something becomes clear: the Israelites saw a unity between the family and the environment.

¹⁰ Psalm 128: 1-6. Whole thing.

¹¹ Perhaps insert a footnote (or maybe content right in the text itself) regarding different types of psalms. This might be good information for the study leader to use as a springboard into introducing the main point.

¹² Many additional examples available. Include extensive citation from Lawrence Boadt in final edition of study.

Blessings in one area are often likened to blessings in another and vice versa. Just like the natural order, the family possessed an inherent order. Both human nature and nature itself were seen as beautiful. Unlike our present political culture, the Israelites lived in a single, consistent worldview. This, of course, leads us to a question: do you live in the united vision of the Israelites, or is your world split in two?

Third Section: *The Pollution of Sex*

Most sociologists agree that there is a profound connection between (1) a nation's attitude towards sexual morality, and (2) the nation's overall health. The connection is very easy to understand. As sex goes, so goes marriage. As marriage goes, so goes the family. And as the family goes, so goes the formation of children and thereby the entire citizenry. In short, as sex goes, so goes the nation and so goes the culture. This relationship has perhaps never been more clearly evidenced than in the studies of JD Unwin, a non-religious Oxford sociologist who spent his lifetime examining the relationship between sex and culture. Over the course of his life, Unwin examined the data from 86 societies and civilizations to see if there is a relationship between sexual morality and cultural flourishing. Unwin found, without any exceptions, that a decrease in sexual morality lead to a decrease in culture, societal order, and natural prosperity.¹³ JD Unwin understood the delicate balance of the human ecosystem, and he would likely agree with the Catholic Church when she says: "The family...stands at the foundation of the life of the human person and as the prototype of every social order."¹⁴ And, "It is patently clear the good of the persons and the proper functioning of society are

¹³ For more information on the work of JD Unwin see his landmark study *Sex and Culture*.

¹⁴ Compendium. 211.

closely connected with the healthy state of conjugal and family life. Without families that are strong in their communion and stable in their commitment peoples grow weak.”¹⁵

JD Unwin’s findings support the view held by the Catholic Church that there is a similarity between the order one finds in nature and the order one finds in human nature (or the order of the family). Both should be protected. There is such a thing as natural, environmental order. This order is good and we should protect it. There is also an order to human nature and sexuality. This order is good and we should respect and protect it, too. When we violate the order of nature in some way, we generally call that “pollution.” Now, if human nature is indeed part of nature, then we should be able to call violations of human nature “moral pollution,” and for the very same reason we can claim that we have in some way by our actions damaged human nature – whether it is our body, our sexual nature or some other aspect of our moral nature. Therefore, our understanding of ecology should be expanded to include respect for and protection of both nature (the environment) and human nature; in short, our ecology should be catholic (or universal) in kind, including both environmental ecology and moral ecology.

If all of this is the case, we now have a new lens through which we can understand the Church’s sexual teaching. Every sexual sin is a kind of pollution. Whereas ecological pollution violates the nature of the planet, sexual sin violates *human* nature. Nowhere is this clearer than with pornography.¹⁶ Pornography takes a natural thing, sex, and makes it artificial. It replaces wholesome sexuality with fake hyperstimulation, much like McDonalds replaces healthy food with fake, hyper-stimulating French fries. Both are harmful to the body

¹⁵ Compendium. 213.

¹⁶ For some excellent resources on this topic, don’t hesitate to consult Chapter 5 of FOCUS *Theology of the Body bible study*. Also, “*Fight the New Drug*” has some excellent content: <https://fightthenewdrug.org/get-the-facts/>

because they place things the body which never belonged there. Humans evolved for millions of years to live and thrive in a certain type of habitat. The human habitat never involved pornography, and the hyper-stimulating and disorienting effects of pornography cripple genuine human intimacy. While it is fairly easy to see how pornography is sexual pollution, other sexual sins (especially contraception) constitute a similar kind of unnatural, harmful intervention. Bible study leaders should use their discretion to choose a sexual sin in which they feel competent to lead a discussion. The key is to relate sexual sin to environmental pollution. The latter destroys the natural ecology at large. The former destroys the human ecology of the family.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

First Section: The Ecology of the Family

Note to leader (optional): Depending on the demographic of your students, you may choose to make the point regarding imperfect families mentioned at the beginning of the Leader Guide. This chapter is about the importance of the family, and it's easy for students from broken families to despair. Depending on your group of students, you may wish to address the issue.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Last week, we talked about the importance of good stewardship of the environment. We're going to be building on that today as we discuss the ecology of the family, and how protection of the environment and protection of the family are related.

1. How have you seen the world's attitudes toward the family and toward the environment change over your lifetime?

Response: Discuss.

To launch into our discussion today, I'm going to read a quote by philosopher Benjamin Wiker. Listen to his description of the American political situation:

In regard to the environment, the Left sees those on the Right as self-righteous, woman-hating, Bible-thumping, voracious consumer-capitalists, ripping up millions of trees and throwing down endless miles of pavement so they can tank around from mall to mall in their gas-guzzling SUVs, spewing fast-food trash out of their tinted electric windows while singing "God Bless America" and blithely plowing over innocent animals who haplessly wander onto their asphalt paths.

The Right sees the Left as atheistic, human-hating, earth-worshipping socialists who eat funny food, drive politically correct toy cars, and spend their time saving whales and nearly invisible and obscure creek creatures, even while they heartily support abortion, euthanasia, gay marriage, and even the collective extermination of the human species for the sake of saving the natural environment...¹

2. Do you think there is any truth to this description? Which parts of this description would you say are accurate or not accurate?

Response: Discuss.

3. Are Catholics called to protect the environment or the family? How do you see this issue being a compromise or a paradox?

Response: Both. Discuss the difficulty of protecting both in the current political-cultural milieu. Talk about the once-again paradoxical nature of Catholic doctrine.

¹ Wiker. 6-7.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

(Read Matthew 7:13-14.)

4. What importance does this verse have for our conversation?

Response: It's very easy to take one side or the other, only caring about a single set of issues. It takes courage to believe in both!

Second Section: Two Passages, One Morality

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

(Read Job 38: 1-9.)

5. Recalling our study from last week, what does this passage show us about the Israelite's understanding of the environment?

Response: This verse is really meant to be a review. The Israelites approached the natural world with a sense of awe and wonder. Similar to a modern scientist, they had an appreciation for the complexity of creation. Further, they saw creation as a window to understand God.

6. Read Psalm 128: 1-6. Earlier we discussed that the many people in contemporary society see a divide between environment ethics and family/sex ethics. Do you think the Israelites saw things this way?

Response: The Israelites viewed family as a part of creation. They approached both with a sense of awe and wonder. They had an appreciation for the natural order of the family in much the same

way that they had an appreciation for the complex natural order of creation. Both should be respected, and there is a connection between the two. This passage, for example, portrays the family as a blessing likened to a garden! The Israelites lived in a unified world view! We should do the same!

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

At their roots, there is a remarkable similarity between the arguments which motivate both Catholic environmentalism and the Catholic Church's teaching on the family and sexuality. Environmentalists understand that there is an exquisite and fragile balance to the natural order. Ecosystems, atmospheres, and the like are delicate things, things which humanity has only begun to understand, and things which ought to be approached with a sense of reverence. A lack of reverence towards the environment results in serious and long-term damage. On the other hand, pro-family people have a deep appreciation for the exquisite but similarly fragile nature of the sexual order, recognizing that even a small deviation in sexual morality can throw off the family unit and have reverberating effects throughout the whole of human society. Thus, the family should be approached with a similarly reverential attitude, an attitude which seeks to conserve a similarly fragile human ecology.

As you can see, these arguments are so similar that the word "ecology" is frequently ascribed to both. As John Paul II says, "The 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."²

² *Centesimus Annus*. 39.

7. What is the significance of both the environment and the family having an “ecology”? What are the implications of this?

Response: Both the Church's teaching on sex and family and the Church's teaching on the environment involve a respect for God's natural order. They also involve a sacramental view. That is, the natural design (or ecology) of the family and the environment are a sort of window into which we can come to a better understanding of God. Distort the design and it's very easy to misunderstand God. Further, if each of these have an ecology, then they are designed in a particular way with particular features that will help each one flourish.

8. Do you think your own understanding of these things is more like the Israelites or more like contemporary society? In what ways?

Response: Discuss.

Application

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Much like the environment, the Catholic Church's reasoning on family and sexual ethics has a lot to do with the “natural law.” In short, the Church believes that a lack of respect for certain rules in sexuality will have far-reaching ramification in the “human ecology.” Human families and human sexuality are complex things. Just like a biological ecosystem, if they are not respected, they will fall into decline. Thus, we can speak of sins against sexuality or the family as a kind of “pollution.”

9. What, if any, practices of contemporary society should be considered a kind of sexual and/or family pollution?

Response: Allow the group to discuss. Here you may choose to go any number of routes. See the below three questions and references for where to take the conversation.

10. Pornography: We live in a throw away society of fast-food and plastic plates. Do you think this mentality effects our approach to sexuality? Does pornography constitute a kind of sexual pollution? Does it have any negative effects? How so?

Response: Discuss. See chapter 5 of FOCUS' Theology of the Body Bible study for more information. There are also many resources available online on pornography. Just like fast food, pornography pollutes a person's mind, rendering them less able to have a healthy experience of life and authentic sexuality.

