

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING



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Chapter I

Paradox and Catholic Social Teaching

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Thing: The primary purpose of this Bible study is to introduce students Catholic Social Teaching in general and to two of its central principles: (1) the Universal Destination of Goods and (2) the Right to Private Property. This chapter will look closely at the following points:

- Catholic Social Teaching is the Church's thought on building a just society. It is paradoxical, radical, and does not allow compromise.
- The Universal Destination of Goods says that the whole of the world's resources are made to satisfy the whole of the world's needs. Scripture passages from Genesis and Leviticus will be used to discuss this principle.
- The Church recognizes a Right to Private Property. This right flows from our nature as free and rational creatures, but it is limited by the Universal Destination of Goods. The relationship between these two principles is not a compromise but a paradox.

Leader Tip: As will be the case in every chapter of this Bible study, we encourage those who wish to go deeper into the finer points of the teachings to consult the references in the footnotes as well as the

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. For some, this study's content is sufficient to guide a fruitful conversation on the topic. For others, more depth and detail will be necessary. If your study falls in the latter group, we recommend purchasing a copy of the *Compendium* for further enrichment (though it can also be accessed online, as can the other Church documents mentioned in this study). The goal of this study is to provide simple outlines for conversation, along with references in source material to supplement those conversations, if desired. Thus, it is the responsibility of the leader to prepare and guide conversation at the appropriate level of depth for the members of their study. For your reference, the footnotes referring to Church documents throughout this study generally cite paragraph numbers (not page numbers), allowing for uniformity across editions.

Introduction: On Paradox, Compromise and Being Radical

Spend a moment reflecting on the following three words: paradox, compromise and radical. The word *paradox* refers to something which appears contradictory, but which, in actuality, is not. A paradox is different from a contradiction: something which is paradoxical is not actually false, but only seemingly false. Consider this example: A good father must often do things which make his children cry. It may seem like such a father is not loving. After all, how could it be loving to make a child cry? Well, the reality is that sometimes love is tough. Sometimes fathers need to tell their children no, and sometimes doing so makes them cry. Thus, sometimes love is the sort of thing that makes people cry. It's a paradox, but it is true.

The first word, *paradox*, differs from the second word, *compromise*, and it's important that we understand the difference. Think about the example of the father with his children. It would be easy to interpret

his actions like this: “Sometimes fathers need to be loving, but sometimes fathers need to be tough. Good fathers should balance love and toughness. They should *compromise* between the two.” Is this interpretation correct? No! The problem with this interpretation is that it misunderstands love as compromise. The ultimate nature or true meaning of love is to pursue the good of another — that is, to love someone is to do what is best for them. For example, it is loving to take alcohol from an alcoholic, even though doing it might cause a lot of suffering. Therefore, the father in this situation is not compromising. In fact, exactly the opposite is the case. To love, really love, sometimes you need to be tough. The nature of love is paradoxical.

Authentic love brings us to our third word: radical. What does it mean to be radical? The Latin root of radical is *radix*, which means “root” or “origin.” Thus, to be radical means to live in accord with the “roots” or the true nature of things. It means to go back to the fundamentals, to understand the reasons behind the actions, and to live in accord with those reasons. Once again, a father who loves even when it is tough is not compromising. He is loving in truth. He knows the meaning of love, and he lives in accord with that meaning. He pursues the good of his children, even when it is painful. Paradoxically, in certain situations, to be loving is to be tough. For this reason, the father is not compromising. Rather, it would be more appropriate to say that the father is radical — that the father loves his children with a radical love.

Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is difficult. Why? Because it is paradoxical. It does not allow compromise. And it challenges us to love radically. CST is paradoxical because it often encourages us to believe two things which seem to be in contradiction, but which, in actuality, are entirely consistent. When it comes to social justice, the world is full of people who choose to fight for one good cause at

the detriment of another. Unfortunately, such an approach usually makes the world worse, not better. In many cases, the Church asks us: "Do you have the courage to fight for your cause without sacrificing another?" Do you, for example, have the courage to fight for the poor and the unborn? Do you have the grit to protect the planet without sacrificing the sexual dignity? Do you have the tenacity to fight corrupt people without conceding to an unjust form of government? Do you have the wisdom to fight for global justice without destroying local community? These questions pose a challenge to love radically. Catholic Social Teaching is difficult because love is difficult.

This Bible study will examine the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Before we launch into our first principle, there is one caveat. Catholic Social Teaching is the Church's thought on building a just society. The principles of CST are important for our political decisions and actions. That said, they rarely require a specific political position. In most cases, the Church will define things at the level of principle but leave the application of that principle to the minds and hearts of individual believers. For example, the Church has said on many occasions that true Christians must have a deep respect for the ecological protection of our planet. Thus, in a certain sense, obedient Catholics are required to promote the dignity of creation. Thus, *as a principle*, Catholics must believe in the protection of the environment, and radically so. Nevertheless, it is perfectly acceptable for Catholics to disagree concerning the particulars of the application of this principle. For example, some Catholics may think it best to cultivate a greener planet through wind energy while others prefer solar. Both positions are acceptable, and neither is required by the Church. What is required is a radical commitment to the principle that God's creation ought to be stewarded with care.

Finally, it may be common for Catholics involved with the New

Evangelization to wonder why FOCUS might need a Bible study on Catholic Social Teaching. There are many reasons motivating the importance of this study, all of which will become apparent as the study unfolds. That said, it was Pope John Paul II himself who insisted on the importance of the Church's social teaching when he said, "The 'new evangelization,' which the modern world urgently needs and which I have emphasized many times, must include among its essential elements a proclamation of the Church's social doctrine."¹

The Universal Destination of Goods

At its core, one might conceive of the debates between communists and capitalists as motivated by a simple question: To whom do the goods of the earth belong, to the individual or the common? Catholic Social Teaching gives a paradoxical answer: "Yes." This answer is clear from the Catholic Church's simultaneous affirmation of two principles: the Universal Destination of Goods and the Right to Private Property. You may have never heard of these principles, but understanding them is key to understanding Catholic Social Teaching. Our journey toward a deeper appreciation of them will begin in Genesis and move to Leviticus. Let's begin by reading a couple passages from the creation narratives in Genesis:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."²

"And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day."³

¹ Pope Saint John Paul II. *Centessimus Annus*. 5.

² Genesis 1:1

³ Genesis 1:31

The Vatican begins its summary of CST with a reflection on the *gratuity* of creation and human existence.⁴ What does “gratuity” mean, and what does it have to do with Genesis? Something is gratuitous if it is done without charge or payment. It’s like a donation or a gift. Before we go any further with Catholic Social Teaching, we must consider something very basic, but nevertheless very profound: Creation itself is gratuitous. Consider the passage from Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Before God’s creative act, there was only the void (or nothingness). Were it not for the creative power of God, neither you nor the universe itself would exist at all! All creation is gift!

Stop for a moment and think about the implications of the gratuitousness of creation. Human beings are often self-righteous and selfish. For example, it’s very common for a hard-working person to think that they deserve wealth, saying, “I worked hard, I deserve to be rich!” While the Church does not deny the importance of hard work and just reward, she encourages every person to keep God’s gratuity in mind. Even the hardest-working person has received their very existence from God. All of us are the beneficiaries not only of the creative act of God, but also of the sacrifice of the generations that have gone before us. For example, if we own and operate a computer, we benefit from the technological advancement of previous generations. If we live in a stable country, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrifice of millions of talented men and women who have fought to keep our borders safe. If we have a college education, we are reaping the rewards of centuries of scholars who have contributed to human patrimony. Human beings are utterly dependent on the work of prior generations in such a way that they could never repay the enormity of the gifts they have received. Life itself is gratuitous. To be human is to

⁴ For additional Scripture references and a beautiful treatment of gratuity in Catholic Social Teaching, see paragraphs 20-27 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

live and breathe in the gifts which God and other people have freely given. The balances are always stacked against us; none of us could ever repay even a fraction of what we have received.

The Old Testament prophets had a strong sense of God's gratuitous action. They realized that human beings tend to be selfish, so they specifically enacted rules to keep people from falling to their selfish inclinations. Consider the following from the book of Deuteronomy:

"At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the Lord's release has been proclaimed."⁵

While the practice of the "Sabbatical Year," as it was called amongst the ancient Jews, is not taught by the Catholic Church, this ancient practice offers an important lesson. As humans, our desires are insatiable, and we tend to consume and amass as much wealth as we can get our hands on. Our selfish tendencies contradict God's gratuity, who made the universe not just for us but for the entire human race! The Catholic Church calls this the *Universal Destination of Goods*, which says that, "God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all people."⁶ We can understand a lot about the Universal Destination of Goods simply by looking at the name; in the end, all the goods of creation have the same, universal destination. That destination is the satisfaction of the whole of the world's genuine needs. If anyone in humanity uses the goods of the world in a wasteful way, they are violating the gift which God intended for the whole human race. In this sense, the whole of creation is the possession of the entirety of

⁵ Deuteronomy 15. These laws are also found in Leviticus 25 and Exodus 23.

⁶ For a fuller treatment of the origin and meaning of the Universal Destination of Goods, please refer to the *Compendium*, particularly paragraphs 171 – 181.

the human race. The earth was not made for the satisfaction of a few; it was made for the satisfaction of all.

The Right to Private Property

The Universal Destination of Goods says that the whole of creation is given to satisfy the whole of the world's needs. Some people might interpret this principle to say that the Church teaches communism, but nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the Church has explicitly condemned communism on various occasions.⁷ Instead, the Church takes the paradoxical position of believing not only in the Universal Destination of Goods, but also the Right to Private Property. How could the Church believe in both of these things? Well, let's first take a look at the Church's reasoning on private property. For context, let's once again return to Genesis. After creating the heavens and the earth, God created humanity:

*"God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened."*⁸

⁷ Here, it is important to note that the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum*, a document which many view as the beginning of the Church's writings on social teaching, was motivated in large part by a desire to condemn the ills of communism and socialism. These condemnations are explicit throughout the encyclical. For anyone interested in understanding the Church's position on social doctrine, economics and/or politics as it pertains to economics, *Rerum Novarum* is a must-read.

⁸ Genesis 1:27 – 30.

The Church draws so much theology from Genesis, so you have probably heard these passages many times. When it comes to private property, two elements of this passage are most important: one, the *Imago Dei*, or God's creation of Adam and Eve in his image; and two, God's giving of creation to Adam and Eve. What do these have to do with private property?

To be created in God's image and likeness is to be created both free and rational — but freedom and rationality are difficult to exercise without some basic possessions. For example, most people would agree that a free person should be allowed to use one's mind to provide for oneself and one's family. When people lack basic goods like food and shelter, they lack the freedom to do something which is fundamentally human (e.g., a person is not free to fix their home if they don't own a hammer). Basic freedom requires ownership of basic goods. When the Church upholds the right to private property, she is not merely upholding a person's right to own things; she is upholding a view of humanity in which the human person is both free and rational. It is for this reason that the Church has always condemned communism.

With this understanding of private property, we are now in a better position to understand the relationship between the Right to Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods. Recall that the Universal Destination of Goods says that the whole of the world's goods is given to satisfy the whole of the world's needs. The ability to exercise one's freedom and rationality is a basic human need. This applies not only to food and shelter, but also to the development of one's human capacities. Thus, human beings not only need food, water, shelter and other such corporeal necessities. Human beings, if they are to live in a dignified way, ought to own the basic goods necessary to exercise and develop their freedom and rationality. In

this way, ownership of private property is among those things listed as basic needs. And in this way, the paradox is resolved. There is both a Universal Destination of Goods and a Right to Private Property because private property is among humanity's basic needs. Just like a father's love sometimes requires the father to be tough, the satisfaction of the world's needs requires the ownership of basic goods.⁹

This is just one example of the Church's belief in two things which seem to contradict one another, but which are in fact entirely consistent: the Universal Destination of Goods and the Right to Private Property. That said, the Church does not allow for an unlimited right to private property, through which the greedy ownership of some precludes the basic needs of others. For the Church, the Right to Private Property is limited by the Universal Destination of Goods. Thus, it is unjust for some to own so much that their greed keeps others from things like food, shelter, healthcare and education. Unfortunately, in contemporary consumerist culture, we often own so many things that we keep others from owning the things that they need. Further, it is all too common for those of us in wealthy countries to become slaves to our possessions, handing over our souls to the American rat race. This is a tragedy, and it flies in the face of Catholic Social Teaching. Private property is meant to expand man's freedom, not diminish it. We who live in wealthy countries must always be wary of our seemingly insatiable desires to own more stuff. With every trip to the store, we should ask ourselves: "Does this purchase make me free, or does it make me a slave?"

⁹ The interconnected nature of Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods is further explained in paragraph 177 of the *Compendium*: "Private property, in fact, regardless of the concrete forms of the regulations and juridical norms relative to it, is in its essence only an instrument for respecting the principle of the universal destination of goods; in the final analysis, therefore, it is not an end but a means". Thus, in the final analysis, the right to private property is subservient to meeting the genuine needs of the entire human population.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Note for Leaders: For additional preparation, please seek further understanding from the Vatican's Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. For this chapter, leaders are encouraged to consult paragraphs 160 – 184.

Section 1: Contradiction, Paradox and Radicality

Note to leader: please read aloud.

As we dive into our conversation about Catholic Social Teaching, we are going to begin our discussion with a conversation about three words: contradiction, paradox, and radical. The relationship between these words is very important.

1. What is a contradiction?

Response: A contradiction involves two statements which negate each other. Both of them cannot be true. At least one must be false.

2. What is a paradox?

Response: A paradox involves two statements which seem to contradict one another, but which in actuality do not.

3. What does it mean to be radical?

Response: See above explanation of the word radical involving the Latin root radix.

4. Do you feel like you understand the differences between these three words?

Response: Discuss.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Catholic Social Thought is the Church's teaching about how to build a just society. It provides us with a set of principles which are designed to help us change the world for the better.

5. Considering what we know about the word "radical," why do you think Catholic Social Teaching is sometimes described in this way?

Response: Catholic Social Thought is a call to get back to the root (radix) of things. It's a call to return to the way things were created to be. Oftentimes the principles of CST seem contradictory when in fact they are paradoxical. This presents a temptation to choose to believe in some teachings and not others. The faithful Catholic believes in all the Church's teachings, seeing paradoxes in place of contradictions.

Section 2: The Universal Destination of Goods

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Next, we're going to look at two Scripture passages.

(Read Genesis 1:1.)

(Read Genesis 1:31.)

6. What do these verses have to with Catholic Social Teaching and how to build the kingdom of God?

Response: Allow students to discuss. Emphasize the gift of creation and God's generosity.

7. Does anyone know what the word "gratuity" means?

Response: Something is gratuitous if it is done without charge or payment. It's like a donation or a gift. At the beginning of their discussion of Catholic Social Teaching, the bishops are encouraging us to consider something basic, but nevertheless profound. Creation itself is gratuitous. Consider the passage from Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Before God's creative act, there was only the void (or nothingness). Were it not for the creative power of God, neither you nor the universe itself would exist at all! All creation is gift! If we are to change the world for the better, we must begin by understanding the world itself is a gift! It was given to us! We did not make it!

8. Do you appreciate the gratuity of creation? Do you view creation, including your own life, as gratuitous?

Response: Discuss. Here it may be helpful to bring up the following examples: national security, technological advance, academia (scholastic patrimony). In all instances, college students are the beneficiaries of people whom they could never repay. As for national security, anyone living in a safe country is benefitting from a sacrifice of those who gave their very lives (a gift which can never be repaid). As for technological advance, any college student who regularly uses technology is benefitting from the cumulative results of thousands of years of work (again, this is a gift which can never be repaid). As for academia and scholastic patrimony, the university system itself is a sort of philanthropy on which students are the beneficiaries of hundreds of years of academic development. In all three cases, the fruits of previous generations are given in a manner that can never be repaid.

9. The first principle of Catholic Social Thought is called the "Universal Destination of Goods." The Universal Destination of Goods says that creation is given to meet the needs of all of humanity. Creation is for everyone, not just the rich. What does gratuity have to do with the Universal Destination of Goods?

Response: Once someone recognizes the gratuitous nature of creation, it is much more difficult to selfishly amass wealth. All of creation is a gift, and none of us has an unlimited right to wealth and possessions.

10. Do you personally seek to bring about the Universal Destination of Goods? In other words, are you seeking to meet the basic needs of those who have less than you?

Response: Discuss.

Section 3: The Right to Private Property

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

The Universal Destination of Good might make it seem like the Church believes in communism, or the belief that all property should be owned by the common group. However, this is not the case. The Church also believes in the right to private property. Let's look at a passage from Scripture to begin our discussion of private property.

(Read Genesis 1:27-30.)

11. *What do you think this passage has to do with the right to private property?*

Response: The Church has always understand the "dominion" given to Adam to mean that Adam was given ownership.

12. *The Church teaches that human beings are both rational and free. What do these qualities have to do with the Right to Private Property?*

Response: Private Property is a natural extension of man's rationality and freedom. Think about it. Human beings are called to do things like start families, build homes, and provide for those families. They are called to do these things in a way that respects freedom and rationality. Like Adam, they are called to have dominion over creation. But a person without any property is not really free. Abject poverty is prison which keeps people from living fulfilled human lives. That is, they are not really capable of doing these basic human things. Without some property, human beings are not free to fulfill their humanity by doing basic human things in a dignified way.

13. *How is it possible for the Church to believe in both the Universal Destination of Goods and the Right to Private Property? Is this a paradox or a contradiction?*

Response: See discussion in the application section of the Leader Guide. Remember, the ownership of basic goods is a human need.

14. *It has often been said that the world contains enough to satisfy the whole of the world's need but not enough to satisfy the whole of the world's greed. What might this statement have to do with the relationship between the Right to Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods?*

Response: Paradoxically, the Church believes in both the Right to Private Property and the Universal Destination of Goods, but the Right to Private Property is not unlimited. People are encouraged to own private property in such a way that contributes to the Universal Destination of Goods; anything else is greed.

15. *Do you think your own property corresponds to the way in which the Church sees property?*

Response: Discuss.

16. *Do you own any possessions which make you less, not more, free? Would it be best for you to rid yourself of such possessions? If the answer is yes, can you do so by the next study session?*

Response: Discuss.



Chapter II

Micro-Brew and Mother Teresa

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 22 - 31

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 32 - 40

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Thing: The primary purpose of this Bible study is to introduce students to two principles of Catholic Social Teaching: (1) Subsidiarity and (2) Solidarity. This chapter will look closely at the following points:

- *The Principle of Subsidiarity* urges governments, communities and other groups to keep as much power as possible at the lowest level of authority. The contemporary impulse to “go local” finds fulfillment in subsidiarity.
- *The Principle of Solidarity* calls us toward unity and to recognize that we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological differences. Every human being desires interpersonal unity because we are all ultimately made for perfect unity with the Trinity.
- We are all called to live both solidarity and subsidiarity, but doing so is a radical paradox.

Subsidiarity: Re-Stringing the Social Fabric

The number of breweries in the U.S. has more than doubled in the last five years. The lion's share of that growth is in micro-breweries and local brew-pubs. To date, the United States boasts more than 7,000 breweries!¹ Growth in the micro-brew industry has taken place in lockstep with farm-to-table dining, interest in local businesses and movement to smaller cities. There's no doubt about it: Today's young people are going local! It is interesting to note that many of the young people who are attracted to local industry are also opposed to organized religion, especially Catholicism. For many, any religion as organized as the Catholic Church runs counter to their organic intuitions. The purpose of this chapter is to flip that mindset on its head. In reality, the 21st-century impulse to "go local" finds fulfillment in Catholic Social Teaching.

Most young people today have an impression that their human fabric has been violated. They want a sense of wholeness and connection in their lives, the sort of thing built from healthy relationships, responsibility and an identifiable role within a group. Whether by their disconnected families, social media or transient lifestyles, young people today are starved for genuine, person-to-person relationships. Thus, millennial and Gen-Z Americans are turning to the local community to repair their damaged social fabric. Local community has exactly what young people crave: genuine conversations in real-time, homemade dinners around actual kitchen tables and heart-warming relationships with familiar neighbors. All of these are things which most people desperately want, but which most young people rarely experience. The search for community is at its root a search to reclaim the genuinely human — or, one might say, the genuinely

¹ Brewers Association. Stats and Data: National Beer Sales and Production Data. Accessed July 1, 2020. <https://www.brewersassociation.org/statistics-and-data/national-beer-stats/>.

social dimension of the human experience. For this reason, it's not surprising that Catholic Social Teaching has something to say about this 21st-century impulse.

The Catholic Church has always sought to defend the natural expressions of community, most especially the local community. In fact, the Church has articulated the principle of "subsidiarity"¹ in part as a means to cultivate and protect natural, local community. Listen to these words from Pope Pius XI:

*"Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time **a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.** For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them."*²

At its core, the principle of subsidiarity recognizes that man is a social being in need of making real contributions to his community. It is one of the most "constant and characteristic directives of the Church's social doctrine," and it encourages everyone in positions of power to adopt a stance of help (Latin – *subsidium*) towards people and institutions under their domain.³ Further, the principle recognizes that individual people need their individuality to be recognized. People need to participate and make a difference in a concrete group that they can see and feel. Human "companionship produces the primary form

² For a very good and very concise explanation of the Principle of Subsidiarity, go to paragraphs 185-188 of the Compendium.

³ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*: AAS 83 (1991), 854 – 856; John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 15: AAS 80 (1988), 528 – 530.

⁴ *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. 185-186.

of interpersonal communion. For by his innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential.”⁵ Young people know what happens when their ability to relate in their local community is taken away — for example, when power is constricted to international agencies and stolen from local governments. When this happens, people begin to feel like cogs in a wheel, playing no meaningful role in the life of the people around them. Today’s young people are very familiar with faceless, powerless anonymity, and it is for this reason that they so passionately crave community. The Catholic Church encourages this desire with the principle of subsidiarity.

The principle of subsidiarity is meant to offer empowerment and dignity in a world which often limits power to the elite. The principle has value for all levels of society, including families, neighborhoods, corporations, cities and nations. In the family, parents must avoid stealing their children’s genuine freedom while nevertheless retaining their role as educators and disciplinarians. In a corporation, managers need to make sure they don’t micromanage; after all, micromanaging deprives employees of the opportunity to use their freedom, skills and creativity. It frustrates employees, demoralizes them and demotivates them. In short, it steals their individuality. In nations where everything is handled by the top tier of government, people feel as though “big brother” is infringing on their space. In all such cases, whether it’s the family, the corporation or the nation, the principle of subsidiarity is the antidote to the problem.

⁵ United States Council of Catholic Bishops. Call to Family, Community, and Participation. Citing Second Vatican Council, *The Church in the Modern World*. Gaudium et Spes. no. 12. Accessed July 20, 2020. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/call-to-family-community-and-participation.cfm>

Solidarity: A Heart for All

Young people crave community, and it's not just a millennial and Gen-Z thing. Humanity has always sought close-knit groups. Ancient Greek philosophers posited that man is a fundamentally social animal; and since the beginning of their evolutionary history, *homo sapiens* have consistently lived in groups. But why, you might ask, do human beings crave community so intensely?

There are a variety of answers to this question — sociological, biological, even philosophical — but today we're interested in the theological answer to this question. The theological answer to the question of community, or the ultimate reason why people crave interpersonal relationships, can be summarized in one word: Trinity. As Catholics, we believe God is three Persons united in an intimate exchange of love. This communion of Persons created the whole universe, including every human being. And, perhaps most importantly, every human being is called to join the Trinity in heaven. We were created by the Trinity and are ultimately called to return to it. Yes, as human persons, we are called to join the divine Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in their heavenly relationship of love. This is our destiny, the final goal of our lives.⁶

What does the Trinity have to do with Catholic Social Teaching? Well, Catholic Social Teaching is the Church's wisdom applied to social realities — things like justice, community, the poor and the common good. The Trinity has everything to do with social realities because the Trinity is the fulfillment of all social realities. In fact, every earthly social relationship is meant to give human persons a little glimmer into the Trinitarian life of God!

⁶ Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005. 14 – 16.

This prompts the question: What is the Trinity like? What are we shooting for? Many theological treatises have been written on the beauty of the Trinity, but here we will make one very simple observation. The Trinity involves both unity and distinction. Let's unpack that a bit. On the one hand, the Trinity involves unity — namely, the Trinity is a *union* of three Persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, the Persons of the Trinity are distinct. While the Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God, neither the Father, the Son nor Holy Spirit is the same as one another. Thus, the Persons of the Trinity are both united and distinct.⁷

There is an analogy between the divine communion of Persons (the Trinity) and human communities. In a distant but still relevant sense, human communities involve distinction and unity. Healthy human communities recognize both the individuality of each person and the connections that individuals have with each other. While the principle of subsidiarity preserves individuality, the principle of solidarity calls us to unity. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops states, the principle of solidarity calls us to recognize that “we are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they may be.”⁸ Solidarity calls people to the unity they so desperately desire.

Nevertheless, within that unity, individual people possess their own unique identity, something which subsidiarity helps to uphold. Solidarity and subsidiarity help us affirm this seemingly contradictory reality. On the one hand, the principle of subsidiarity calls us to recognize the uniquely distinct role that each person

⁷ Most theological errors concerning the Trinity involve a violation of this principle, either saying that one of the Persons is not really God (violating unity) or that the Persons are not really distinct (violating the distinction of the Persons).

⁸ United States Council of Catholic Bishops. Solidarity. Accessed July 11, 2020. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/solidarity.cfm>

plays in society. On the other hand, solidarity calls us to recognize the paradox that every person is part of a common humanity. Recall these famous words from St. Paul:

“As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. Now the body is not a single part, but many. If a foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,’ it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. Or if an ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,’ it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body.”⁹

In a sense, this chapter is about the paradox of individuality and community. Our faith tells us that we are unique individuals, but it also tells us that we are all part of a single body: the Body of Christ. The first section of this chapter called us to recognize the unique role that each person and each level of community plays in society. Millennials want to go local because they recognize that small communities matter, distinct from the larger community. The second section of this chapter called us to recognize a paradox: that while the small community possesses value, we should not lose sight of the larger community of which we are all members. The wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching is once again calling us to recognize a paradoxical reality: the value of both the individual and the common, the distinction and the unity, the local and the global. If we do not

⁹ 1 Corinthians 12:12 – 20

build our communities in a way that recognizes all dimensions of our social existence, we might deny ourselves the fullness of the human experience, an experience that is ultimately oriented towards the Trinity.

Application: Living the Paradox

In the first chapter, we spoke about paradox and about being radical, two traits which animate the lives of most saints. Recall that a paradox involves two things which in appearance seem contradictory, but which in actuality exist in harmony. To be radical (from the Latin *radix*) is to live in concert with the root or nature of things. To live both subsidiarity and solidarity is to live a radical paradox. It requires one to live in accord with two truths: first, that one should feel a certain sympathy at the global level (solidarity); and second, that one should respect the fabric of the local (subsidiarity). These two realities may seem contradictory, but in actuality they are merely paradoxical.

As fallen human beings, it is difficult to live in accord with subsidiarity and solidarity. Fortunately, the Church has given us examples of people who lived both. Mother Teresa is just such a person. She not only felt the pain of the whole world, she also loved those on her doorstep. On one occasion, when someone asked her what to do to fight global poverty, Mother Teresa said, “Stay where you are. Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering, and the lonely, right where you are — in your own homes and in your own families, in your workplaces and in your schools. You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have eyes to see. Everywhere, wherever you go, you find people who are unwanted, unloved, uncared for, just rejected by society — completely forgotten, completely left alone.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Murdock, William. *Find Your Own Calcutta: Living a Life of Service and Meaning in a Selfish World*. Bloomington, IN: Westbow Press, 2017. 2.

Mother Teresa made a difference in alleviating poverty on an international scale, but she did so in such a way that respected the local fabric. Like Christ, Mother Teresa took the time to work with the poor in her midst. After all, there is no way more certain to encounter the body of Christ:

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I do not need you.' Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor, and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, whereas our more presentable parts do not need this. But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another. If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy."¹¹

There is a relationship between the parts of the body and the body on the whole. The call to recognize both solidarity and subsidiarity is the call to work on both levels. These principles are more than just academic considerations. Pope St. John Paul II says that solidarity is not a "feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."¹² Christ calls us to both feel the suffering of all humanity and work towards its alleviation, and likewise to recognize the poor on our doorstep. Christ calls us to fight for the world at large, but sometimes the best way to do so is to find a mission in your backyard. So, ask

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:21 – 26

¹² Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005. 85.

yourself some questions: What are you doing to live radically? Are you living in both the local and the global? Are you living in accord with both solidarity and subsidiarity? Are you fighting for your planet and for your town? And in so doing, are you striving to catch a glimpse of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

For deeper preparation for this section, please consult the Vatican's Compendium on Catholic Social Teaching, most especially the references to the Trinitarian nature of CST (paragraphs 28 – 37), subsidiarity (185 – 188), and solidarity (192 – 196).

Subsidiarity

1. Have you ever felt like young people today are obsessed with all things local? Why do you think young people are so interested in the local?

Response: Discuss things like micro-breweries and other examples from your own experience. Whether conscious or subconscious, most young people today feel as though their social fabric has been violated. Whether by wrecked families, the alienating effects of social media or transient lifestyles, young people today are starved of genuine, person-to-person relationships.

2. Do you sympathize with the impulse to “go local”? Why or why not?

Response: Discuss.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

For our discussion today, we're going to be looking at two more principles of Catholic Social Teaching: subsidiarity and solidarity. We'll talk about each of these in turn. First, subsidiarity is the principle that recognizes humanity's social nature and its need to make real contributions to his community. Consider these words from Pope Pius XI:

*"Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time **a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.** For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members ... and never destroy and absorb them."*

3. How would you explain subsidiarity in your own words? What do you think the Catholic Church would have to say about the millennial and Gen Z impulse to go local, in light of this definition of subsidiarity?

Response: Discuss. The goal here is to show that Catholic Social Teaching actually affirms this contemporary impulse.

4. What might the principle of subsidiarity look like as it is lived out in various levels of society -- families, businesses, the government, etc.?

Response: The principle has value for all levels of society, including families, neighborhoods, corporations, cities and nations. In the family, parents must avoid stealing their children's genuine

freedom while nevertheless retaining their role as educators and disciplinarians. In a corporation, managers need to make sure they don't micromanage; after all, micromanaging deprives employees of the opportunity to use their freedom, skills and creativity. It frustrates employees, demoralizes them and demotivates them. In short, it steals their individuality. In nations where everything is handled by the top tier of government, people feel as though "big brother" is infringing on their space. In all such cases, whether it's the family, the corporation or the nation, the principle of subsidiarity is the antidote to the problem.

5. How have you experienced subsidiarity positively, in your job, classes, or family? How did it help you flourish in your individual role? Or, how have you experienced a lack of subsidiarity, and how did that affect you?

Response: Discuss.

Solidarity

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Now that we've looked at subsidiarity, we're going to look at another principle, the principle of solidarity. Remember from our first study – some principles of Catholic Social Teaching seem like contradictions, but they're actually paradoxes. Subsidiarity and solidarity are like that. The wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching is once again calling us to recognize a paradoxical reality: the value of both the individual and the common, the distinction and the unity, the local and the global.

Solidarity can be difficult to define, but at its core it is a call to recognize

the interdependent nature of local and global communities.¹ Much more than a vague feeling of compassion, it is a “firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” at every level of society, including the local community, the city, the country and the world. Solidarity recognizes that “we are all really responsible for all” and feel a certain sense of kinship with the global human family.²

6. How do you see people of today striving for solidarity in our world? How do you see Catholics or Christians striving for it, in particular?

Response: Discuss.

7. Every human being has a desire to be understood, sympathized with and unified. Why do you think this is the case?

Response: We are made in the image and likeness of God, and God is Trinity. The Trinity is three Persons in perfect union. We are made for union.

8. How is the relationship between solidarity and subsidiarity a reflection of the Trinity?

Response: The Trinity involves three Persons in a perfect relationship. This relationship involves distinction and unity. As Catholics, we believe that God is three Persons united in an intimate exchange of love. This communion of Persons created the whole universe, including every human being, and every human being is called to join

¹ Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity.

² Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005. 193

the Trinity in heaven. Yes, this is our ultimate calling, our ultimate destiny. As human persons, we are called to join the divine Persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in their heavenly relationship of love. This is our destiny, the final meaning of our lives.³

9. The Trinity is both unity and individuality. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are perfectly united. There is a no division between them, so much so that there is only one God! That said, their unity does not negate their individuality. That is, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each their own person. In an analogous and far lesser sense, we are called to pursue something similar in our own lives. That is, we are called to exist in our families, cities and businesses as both unique individuals and united communities. How are you realizing this reality (or struggling to realize it) in your own life?

Response: Discuss.

Application

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Now that we've explored the relationship between subsidiarity and solidarity, we're going to turn to Scripture to see how we can apply these to our lives.

(Read 1 Corinthians 12:21 – 26.)

10. St. Paul's one-body image is often quoted as an explanation of

³ Pontifical Council for Peace and Justice. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005. 14 – 16.

solidarity. Why do you think this passage is often used?

Response: Think about the final verse: "If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy." This verse clearly highlights the interconnected nature of society.

11. Unfortunately there is division in society, but St. Paul issues a challenge regarding this division: "God has so constructed the body as to give honor to a part that is without it, so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concerns for one another." Who are the less honorable members of the body today? Who in society is "less honorable" and is set aside (divided) from the main body?

Response: Discuss. Make sure to give mention to the poor.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

As fallen human beings, it is difficult to live in accord with subsidiarity and solidarity, but the Church has given us examples of individuals who model both. Mother Teresa is just such a person. She not only felt the pain of the whole world, but she started by serving those on her doorstep. That is, she felt a kinship and compassion for the entire world, but she recognized the importance and individuality of people and communities. On one occasion, when someone asked what to do to solve global poverty, Mother Teresa said:

"Stay where you are. Find your own Calcutta. Find the sick, the suffering, and the lonely, right where you are — in your own homes and in your own families, in homes and in your workplaces and in your schools. You can find Calcutta all over the world, if you have eyes to see. Everywhere, wherever you go, you find people who are

Discussion / Micro-Brew and Mother Teresa

unwanted, unloved, uncared for, just rejected by society — completely forgotten, completely left alone.”⁴

12. How is Mother Teresa an example of both solidarity and subsidiarity, and how can we imitate her in our own lives?

Response: Discuss.

⁴ Murdock, 2.



Chapter III

Mary and the Preferential Option for the Poor

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 42 - 53

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 54 - 62

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Point: The primary goal of this chapter is to explain the Preferential Option for the Poor, a hallmark principle of Catholic Social Teaching. By contrasting the Blessed Virgin Mary with the story of the “rich young man” in the Gospel of Matthew, this chapter shows that encountering the poor can be a transformational source of holiness.

- Outside of Christ, Mary is the model for human holiness. Her humble, receptive response at the Annunciation is an example for us all.¹
- The rich young man is the opposite of Mary, not only in his actions but also in his sense of identity. Whereas Mary was humble, the rich young man was prideful.
- Catholic Social Teaching says that Christians should have a certain preference for the poor. This preference will guide us in determining right action, but it will also help us to cultivate Marian humility and Christ-centered identity.

¹ If you find the content in this chapter too simple, please make ready use of the footnotes to augment discussion. The first section sets Mary as an exemplar of humility. I know of no better (both thorough and concise) exposition of humility than Aquinas’ treatment in the Summa - see Saint Thomas’ *Summa Theologiae, Second Part of the Second Part, Questions 161-162*. You can easily access the content on New Advent here: <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3161.htm>

Mary: A Simple Young Woman

Not counting the Person of Christ, there is no greater person in history than the Virgin Mary. Salvation is through Christ alone, but Jesus became flesh through Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation. She is the conduit through which the Redeemer of the universe entered time and space. For this reason, the Church honors Mary. Her role in salvation cannot be understated, but this chapter is not about Mary's grandeur. It's about her littleness.

Mary was insignificant in the eyes of the world, but her status did not stop God from choosing her as the mother of His only Son. In fact, it may have been Mary's humility which allowed her to accept such a great mission. Let's take a moment to appreciate Mary's humility. Pope St. John Paul II said that Mary's presence, compared to the rest of Israel, was "a presence so discreet as to pass almost unnoticed by the eyes of her contemporaries."² At the time of the Annunciation, Mary was a mere teenager with no social standing whatsoever. Her parents, Joachim and Ann, may have had some modest wealth, but nothing which would have given Mary a leg up on her contemporaries. Again, Mary was an unknown girl. Nevertheless, the Gospels attest that this girl was to become the Mother of God. Let's take a look at the story from the Gospel of Luke:

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!' But she was greatly troubled at the saying and considered in her mind what sort of greeting this might be."³

² John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*. 3.

³ Luke 1:26 – 29

Before we read the rest of the story, we'll pause for just a moment. Take note of Mary's response. After the angel greets Mary, referring to her as "full of grace," Mary is taken aback. Luke says she is "deeply troubled" at the angel's greeting. This reaction attests to her humility. Mary was not one to want the spotlight. And "full of grace" — what a lofty title! Why on earth would an angel be referring to Mary in this way? Humility characterizes Mary's response, but the story continues:

"And the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.'"⁴

Let's pause again for a moment here. Think about what it would have been like for Mary to receive this news from an angel. Without any warning, at the age of fourteen, Mary learns that she is to give birth to God. In an instant, her life has been radically changed. Understandably, she asks, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" To this, the angel responds:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.⁵

⁴ Luke 1:30 – 33

⁵ Luke 1:35 – 38

Wow! Mary's world will never be the same again. But here is the most important part of the story: Mary's response. After receiving some life-altering news, Mary responds in unadorned simplicity. There is no fanfare, no drama, no need for undue explanation. Instead, she replies in Luke 1:38 saying: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to thy word."

Mary's humility is characterized by a radical *receptivity* to God's plan. And this receptivity allowed her to realize her own identity. You might say Mary possessed a humble emptiness. And in this emptiness, she did not allow herself to be filled with the false promises of wealth, fame or power. Instead, she humbly waited for God to do His work. She let God fill her. Once He did, Mary gained not only an awe-inspiring sense of God's mercy, but also a deep appreciation of her own identity and calling. Mary's littleness became a road through which God showed the world her greatness. It is for this reason that, just a little while after her meeting with the angel, Mary would exclaim to her cousin:

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name."⁶

Mary's "yes" to the angel Gabriel is referred to as her *fiat*: her joyful acceptance of the will of God. And what a "yes" it was! Mary's willingness to do God's will was perhaps the single most significant thing ever done by anyone other than Christ. Think about it: By saying "yes" to the angel Gabriel, Mary literally conceived divine life in her

⁶ Luke 1:46 – 49

womb! She brought Christ into the world, which in turn allowed Him to save the world. Furthermore, she did all this with humility. Mary refers to herself as the “handmaiden” of the Lord. She knew she was not going to do anything without Christ, so what did she do? Mary courageously and humbly said “yes” to Christ, allowing Him to change her life and the entire world forever. Mary’s humble “yes” was adventurous — it set her on a journey which would engulf the rest of her life and transform the world.

The Rich Young Man

The point of this second section is to contrast the Virgin Mary with someone who responded to God’s call in a different way: the rich young man. The rich young man is completely opposite from Mary. Let’s take a look at his story from the Gospel of Matthew:

“Now someone approached him and said, ‘Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?’ He answered him, ‘Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He asked him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus replied, “‘You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother’; and ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” The young man said to him, ‘All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”⁷

⁷ Matthew 19:16 – 22

Again, Mary could not be any more different than the rich young man. Whereas Mary was humble, he was prideful. Whereas Mary was docile to the will of God, the rich young man was stuck in his ways. Whereas Mary cared for nothing except God, the man cared more for his possessions. Mary's decision led to an extraordinary adventure, one which has been extolled throughout history. The rich young man gave up an opportunity, and history records his actions as a disappointment.

But Mary and the rich young man were not only different when it comes to their actions, they also differed at the level of *identity*. On one hand, the story of the rich young man is the story of a person enslaved by possessions — or, rather, a person who identifies with his possessions. Scripture tells us: “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”⁸ The rich young man's treasure lay in his earthly possessions. As a result, the center of his being, his heart, identified not with God but ultimately with his stuff. This false sense of identity kept the rich young man from following Christ! It probably also kept him from living a fulfilled life.

On the other hand, the story of a Mary is the story of a woman who gained an even deeper sense of her identity precisely because she said “yes” to God's will in her life. Mary was a relatively poor woman. She did not identify with her possessions, and her freedom from a false sense of identity allowed her to encounter Christ in a radical way. Mary's “yes” ultimately deepened her own sense of identity as a child of God. In contrast to the rich man's false identity, which made his life a boring sort of slavery, Mary's true sense of identity became an occasion for her to more deeply realize her own greatness!

⁸ Matthew 6:21

The Preferential Option for the Poor

We all have a little bit of both the Blessed Virgin and the rich young man inside of us. The question is, how do we become more like Mary and less like the rich young man? Saint Thomas Aquinas tells us that pride is the doorway to all sin and humility the gate to all virtue, so the question could not be more important. How do we get on the right track? How do we avoid pride and cultivate humility? There are many answers to this question, but Catholic Social Teaching recommends the poor as a sure route to Christian humility. This leads us to another principle of Catholic Social Teaching: the Preferential Option for the Poor.

We all want to build a better world, and we all want to be holy. The Lord calls us to do these things in different ways; but regardless of our specific vocation, career, or interests, a love for the poor is an essential element of the Christian life. Why? Because it is so easy to neglect the poor.

In the first chapter of this study, for example, we learned about the Universal Destination of Goods. Unfortunately, in our application of this principle, we regularly forget about the poor. In the words of John Paul II: “The principle of the Universal Destination of Goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of a particular concern.”⁹ John Paul II is saying that, as Christians, we ought to have a special love and devotion to the poor. The poor should be on the forefront of our minds. In a certain sense, we ought to have a **preference** for the poor. After all, the Gospels seem to show that Christ Himself had a special love for the poor. Furthermore, since

⁹ Cf. John Paul II, “Address to the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Mexico” (28 January 1979), I/8: AAS 71 (1979), 194 – 195.

the world already has a tendency to mistreat and abuse the poor, it makes sense that the Church would encourage Christians to right this wrong.

Before we go any further, let's take a moment to correct some misconceptions about the Church and the poor — namely, let's make sure we understand what the Church is *not* saying. The Church does not say that material possessions are bad. Quite the opposite is the case. In fact, as we saw in a previous chapter of this study, the Church affirms the Right to Private Property and the goodness of material creation. Further, the Church does not say that a poor person is categorically better than a wealthy person. On the contrary, the Church affirms the equality of all people. And finally, the Church does not say that poor people should remain destitute. In fact, the Church encourages Christians to work towards the alleviation of poverty. In short, the fact that the Church encourages us to encounter the poor does not mean that we shouldn't help the poor out of poverty.

So why does the Church teach the Preferential Option for the Poor? Well, perhaps the most fundamental reason concerns Christ himself. It seems evident in the Gospels that Jesus chose a certain simplicity of life and that the poor had a special place in his heart. Thus, since Christians are called to imitate Christ, it seems we should prefer the poor as well.

In addition to Christ's example, there is another reason to prefer the poor: identity. In the first two sections of this chapter, we spoke of Mary's sense of identity. We then contrasted Mary with the rich young man. If we desire to live out our identity as Mary lived out her identity, the poor help. The poor can teach us about ourselves, but for that we must encounter them. That is, we must learn to see the poor as they really are: beloved children of God. Let's go back to Scripture:

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?” And the king will say to them in reply, “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.” Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.” Then they will answer and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?” He will answer them, “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”¹⁰

This is a challenging Scripture passage. It clearly shows that serving the poor is not an option in the Christian life; it's a requirement. Whether we serve the materially poor, spiritually poor or those who struggle with some other kind of poverty, we must serve the poor.

¹⁰ Matthew 25:31 – 46

Whenever we love the poor, according to this Scripture passage, we are loving Christ. Whatever we do for the poor, we do for Christ.

Perhaps, though, the greatest reason for us to serve the poor is not about what we can do for them, but rather what the poor can do for us. The poor can teach us something about our own identity.

The above Scripture passage stresses the importance of an encounter with the poor. It's clear that the poor have something to gain from us — material possessions, sustenance, education, etc. — but what do we have to gain from the poor? Let's remember the contrast we drew between the Virgin Mary and the rich young man. Remember that the rich young man was kept from following Christ because *he had many possessions*. The rich young man was weighed down by his "stuff." He placed his identity in his things, and in the end, it was slavery to material possessions that kept the rich young man from following Christ.

Now, to a certain extent, we can all be like the rich young man. Just as the rich young man placed his value in things, we all have false idols and false identities into which we invest our value and our identity, whether it be success, popularity, money, etc. To rid ourselves of those idols, it can be helpful to encounter those who lack them. In this way, it can be very helpful to encounter the poor.

The poor understand their *dependence* on God. As human beings, we are prone to thinking we are sufficient in ourselves, that we do not need any help from anyone — even God! But the poor are less prone to this error. The poor know that they are dependent and are less likely to put their stock in things. They are less likely to *identify* with material possessions and/or earthly success. In this way, the poor are *empty* like Mary. And like Mary, they are *receptive* to God's will in their

lives. In sum, the material dependence and receptivity of the poor ought to remind us of our utter dependence and receptivity on God. What the poor experience in terms of material possessions ought to be a guide for how we should act in the spiritual life.

In this way, an encounter with the poor is an opportunity to grow in holiness. So next time you're serving the poor, ask yourself some questions: How can I learn to be like Mary as I serve? In what ways does my heart resemble the heart of the rich young man? What is holding me back from the freedom to follow Christ? In what am I placing my identity? How can the poor teach me to be empty before God? Remember, there is a little bit of the rich young man in each of us, but through the poor, perhaps we can learn to be more like Mary!

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Section 1: A Simple Young Woman

1. Opener: Not counting the Person of Christ, who would you consider to be the greatest person in human history?

Response: The Blessed Virgin Mary. See first paragraph of discussion guide.

Note to leader: please read aloud.

Despite being such an incredible person with such an extraordinary life, the Virgin Mary was humble. Today I would like us to focus on Mary's humility.

(Read: Luke 1:26 – 29.)

2. What strikes you about this passage?

Response: After the angel greets Mary, referring to her as "full of grace," Mary is taken aback. Luke says she is "deeply troubled" at the angel's greeting. This reaction attests to her humility. Mary was not one to want the spotlight. And "full of grace" — what a lofty

title! Why on earth would an angel be referring to Mary in this way? Humility characterizes Mary's response. Mary was an unknown girl, insignificant in the eyes of the world, but her status did not stop God from choosing her as the mother of His only Son. In fact, it may have been Mary's humility which allowed her to accept such a great mission. Pope St. John Paul II said that Mary's presence against the rest of Israel was "a presence so discreet as to pass almost unnoticed by the eyes of her contemporaries."¹ At the time of the Annunciation, Mary was a mere teenager with no social standing whatsoever.

(Read: Luke 1:30 – 33.)

3. What do you think it would have been like to receive this news?

Discuss: Mary's life has been forever changed. One minute she is an insignificant Hebrew girl. The next instant she is the Mother of God. Think about how quickly this happened. Imagine if this had happened to you! And the image given to us in the Gospel of Luke is one of calm, peaceful acceptance. Amazing!

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

After Mary receives this news, she asked, "How can this be, since I have no husband?" To this, the angel responds:

"The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. And behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.'"²

¹ John Paul II. *Redemptoris Mater*. 3.

² Luke 1:35 – 38

4. How does Mary respond to the angel?

Response: Luke 1:38 records Mary's response: "Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."

5. What strikes you about Mary's response?

Response: Mary's humility allowed her to become great. Her radical *receptivity to God's plan allowed her to realize her own identity. You might say Mary possessed a humble emptiness, an emptiness which she would only allow God to fill! She did not allow herself to be filled with the false promises of wealth, fame or power. Instead, she humbly waited for God to do His work. Once He did, Mary gained not only an awe-inspiring sense of God's mercy, but also a deep appreciation of her own identity and calling. Mary's littleness became a road through which God showed the world her greatness. This is evidenced just a little bit later in Scripture when Mary wonders at the works that God has done in her, things which would not have happened if she had not been humble: "And Mary said: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name.'"*³

Section 2: A Rich Young Man

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Mary refers to herself as the "handmaiden" of the Lord. She knew that she was not going to do anything without Christ, so what did she do? Mary courageously and humbly said "yes" to Christ, allowing Him to

³ Luke 1:46 – 49

change her life and the entire world forever. Mary's humble "yes" was adventurous — it set her on a journey which would engulf the rest of her life and transform the world. But Mary was not the only person in Scripture who was asked by the Lord to go on mission. In fact, Mary's response was very different from the response of another person described in Matthew's Gospel as the "rich young man." By way of contrast, let's take a look at that story.

(Read: Matthew 19:16 – 22.)

6. Why did the rich young man say "no" to Christ?

Response: He was too attached to his possessions. The rich young man's slavery to his possessions rendered him incapable of accepting an adventurous life of discipleship.

7. How would you describe the differences between Mary's response to the angel Gabriel and the rich young man's response to Christ?

Response: It appears that Mary and the rich young man possess a fundamentally different sense of self or identity. A person's actions often flow from their identity, and the difference in identity might be the most fundamental difference at play here. Notice how the rich young man's words talk about his works ("I have done all this since my youth") and his things ("he had many possessions"). This evidences that the young man's identity is wrapped up with his stuff and actions. This is very different from Mary's response: "I AM the handmaiden of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word." Mary's response shows a deep and true sense of self. Unlike the rich young man, Mary's identity does not lie in things or actions. It lies in her relationship with the Lord, and her mission is not something

Discussion / Mary and the Preferential Option for the Poor

that she takes on herself; rather, it is something which she receives from the Lord. Mary's receptive identity allows her to enter into an incredible mission with the Father, whereas the young man's flawed sense of identity keeps him from this adventure.

8. In your own life, are there ways you are tempted to respond to God's call with fear or sadness about what you would have to give up? In what ways is God inviting you to a humble "yes" like Mary's?

Response: Discuss.

Section 3: The Preferential Option for the Poor

Note to leader: please read aloud.

Unlike the Virgin Mary, none of us is perfect. We all have a little "rich young man" inside of us. We are all working to perfect our sense of identity. We are all trying to bridge the gap between the rich young man and the Blessed Virgin. In conclusion, we are going to talk about another principle of Catholic Social Teaching: the Preferential Option for the Poor. To understand this principle, we are going to read one more Scripture passage. This passage is referred to as the "Judgement of the Nations."

(Read: Matthew 25:31 – 46.)

9. According to this Scripture passage, how important would you say it is that Christians serve the poor?

Response: This is obviously a rhetorical question, but encourage your group to discuss. This is a critically important question.

Note to leader: please read aloud.

Just like this Scripture passage says, the Church affirms the importance of caring for the poor. It's an essential aspect of the Christian life. In the words of John Paul II: "The principle of the universal destination of goods requires that the poor, the marginalized and in all cases those whose living conditions interfere with their proper growth should be the focus of a particular concern."⁴ What John Paul II is saying is that, as Christians, we ought to have a special love and devotion to the poor. In a certain sense, we ought to have a *preference* for the poor. After all, the Gospels seem to show that Christ Himself had a special love for the poor. Furthermore, since the world already has a tendency to mistreat and abuse the poor, it makes sense that the Church would encourage Christians to right this wrong!

10. Why do you think the Church says it is important that we serve the poor?

Response: There are a lot of reasons why we should serve the poor. Today we are going to talk about one especially important reason: identity. Earlier in this Bible study, we contrasted the responses of Mary and the rich young man. An encounter with the poor is oftentimes a bridge which can transport your identity from the rich young man to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Think about it: The poor have nothing, and yet many of them are happier than us, who have so much. They are less likely to place their identity in wealth, fame or power. While the poor may be enslaved by poverty, they are not subject to the slavery of vanity and material possessions. For this reason, the poor are more able to be like Mary in their response to God! When we encounter the poor, we are better able to see and rid ourselves of our own slavery!

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, "Address to the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Puebla, Mexico" (28 January 1979), *1/8: AAS 71 (1979)*, 194 – 195.

Discussion / Mary and the Preferential Option for the Poor

11. Have you ever worked with the poor? If so, what was it like? Did you have a heart more like Mary's, or more like the rich young man's?

Response: Discuss.

12. What are some ways you could incorporate service of the poor more regularly into your life? How might this change your spiritual life?

Response: Discuss.



Chapter IV

Christian Wonder and Environmental Stewardship

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 64 - 75

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 76 - 84

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Point: For Christians, our relationship with creation begins with wonder and culminates in stewardship. Leaders who wish to cultivate a deeper understanding of this topic should consult the referenced portions of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (see footnotes) and the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (paragraphs 100, 166, 451 – 487). This chapter will explore these topics in the following points:

- The ancient Israelites differed from the ancient Babylonians. Both had creation stories, but the Israelites' stories taught that God and creation are fundamentally good. This opens the door for Christian wonder.
- Today's world is not too different from the world of the Israelites. Just like the Babylonians, many people today do not believe that the world is fundamentally good. As Christians, we have a responsibility to steward the environment with care, even though many do not treat it in the same way.
- Our world, specifically the environment, is going through unprecedented difficulties due to a lack of stewardship. We are all called to protect the world from things which threaten it.

Section 1: Babylon or Israel

The Christian view of creation begins with wonder, and Father Georges Henri Lemaitre is a perfect example. Fr. Lemaitre was a Jesuit Catholic priest and a professor of physics at the University of Louvain. His curiosity and intellectual drive allowed for great discoveries — discoveries which benefitted not only him but also the entire human race. Among other things, Fr. Lemaitre was the first to postulate the “hypothesis of the primeval atom,” more commonly known as the “Big Bang Theory.” This and other ground-breaking advances earned him an international reputation. He was globally renowned as one of the greatest minds in mathematics and physics of his day. Once, in 1933, when presenting his theory at the California Institute of Technology, Fr. Lemaitre received a standing ovation from Albert Einstein, who exclaimed, “This is the most beautiful and satisfactory explanation of creation to which I have ever listened.”¹

As a Catholic priest, Fr. Lemaitre had more reason than most people to wonder at the created universe. Why? Well, as a Catholic, Fr. Lemaitre believed that all of creation is fundamentally good. This sets Fr. Lemaitre at odds with many people and civilizations throughout history. Many, for example, have believed that creation is the product and/or plaything of an evil god or gods. For them, creation is regarded with suspicion, the product of an evil creator. Many more have believed that creation is the result of random chance, so the world is neither good nor evil. For this group, you might say creation is neutral, neither good nor bad. But for the Christian, creation is not evil. It is not neutral. Creation is deeply good! Creation is fashioned by an all-loving, all-good God who desires nothing more than to come into intimacy with his creatures. For the Christian, creation constitutes a

¹ Lambert, Dominique. “Einstein and Lemaitre: two friends, two cosmologies...” Inters.org: Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science. Date Accessed: July 28, 2020. <http://inters.org/einstein-lemaitre>. See also John Farrell's *The Day Without Yesterday: Lemaitre, Einstein, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005.

kind of sign or sacrament.² It tells us something about God. Thus, for the Christian, it makes sense to be in wonder and awe of the natural world.

The first part of the 21st century has seen nature become a “fad” for both Christians and non-Christians alike. It is common to hold creation in reverence. Nevertheless, Christian wonder should not be taken for granted. Again, not all people in history have viewed creation as a good. To understand the unique standpoint of the Judeo-Christian view of creation, let’s take a moment to contrast it with another view of creation — that of the ancient Babylonians.

In the late second millennium B.C., the Babylonian people had a far different account of creation. Like most ancient civilizations, the Babylonians had gods for everything: gods of the sun, the sky, the water, even the trees. The Babylonians believed these gods had been in a long-standing war with one another and that humanity came about as a result of this war. According to the Babylonians, humans were created when a warrior god, Marduk, ordered another god to fashion human beings from the dead carcass of his defeated enemy. Marduk used the following words to “create” the human race:

“Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, ‘man’ shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease!”³

² Here, “sacrament” is not used to indicate one of the seven primary sacraments of the Catholic Church. Those sacraments — including the Eucharist, reconciliation, marriage, etc. — are established by Christ as more manifest outward signs which confer special graces. In this instance, we use the word “sacrament” in a lesser but still correct sense. Plain and simple, when we say creation is “sacramental,” we merely mean that creation shows forth certain things about God’s nature. Creation can teach us about God.

³ Boadt, Lawrence, Richard J. Clifford, and Daniel J. Harrington. *Reading the Old Testament: an Introduction*. 2nd ed. / rev. by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. New York: Paulist Press, n.d. 91-93.

The Babylonian story is *far different from the Christian creation accounts in Genesis*. For the Babylonians, the universe was an arena for the gods to fight each other, and humanity was nothing more than a savage pawn in a divine game. Think about what kind of implications this would have for the Babylonian view of creation. How, for example, would a Babylonian see a sunrise? How would they interpret the coming of winter? How would they view the changing of the seasons? For the Babylonian, it would make perfect sense to view all creation with fear. After all, the Babylonian creator was a cruel warrior, and humanity itself was nothing more than a tribe of savages. The Babylonians and many other ancient civilizations understood creation quite differently than Christians do. The Babylonian worldview did not cultivate wonder; it cultivated fear.

Keeping the Babylonians in mind, let's take a moment to review the Christian story of creation. Keep in mind that the ancient Israelites lived in Babylonian captivity for many years. Thus, they would have had a deep appreciation for the value of their own creation story. You have likely heard the Genesis stories on many occasions, but let's take a quick moment to review some key passages:

*"In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth — and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters — Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light 'day,' and the darkness he called 'night.' Evening came, and morning followed — the first day."*⁴

The first lines of the biblical creation story tell a different tale than that of the Babylonians. For the Israelites, there is only one God, and this God created all things: the light, the dark, the water, the wind, the trees, everything in creation. The wind was not the result of one

⁴ Genesis 1:1 – 5

pagan god at war with another; rather, the whole of creation was the result of a single, good God. The God of the Israelites did not create humanity a savage to serve his whims. Rather, the Israelites believed that humanity was the crown jewel of creation, and all creation was given as a gift to humanity, as we see later in the same passage:

“Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.”⁵

The Israelite creation account differs not only from that of the Babylonians, but also from any other creation story in the ancient world. This account communicates that there is only one God, a **good** God, and that creation itself is also **good**. Further, unlike the Babylonian account, humanity does not serve the elements (the wind, water and the rain). Rather, God created the elements in service to man. This put Israelites in a privileged position. Rather than being ad odds with creation, the Israelites existed in harmony with the natural order. What was for the Babylonians a relationship of antagonism is actually a relationship of cooperation. Man is not a slave or enemy of creation; instead, Scripture says he has *dominion* over it. Man rules over creation, and creation, with all its order and beauty, exists to serve humanity.

Section 2: Modern Babylonians or Christian Stewards?

What does it mean to have *dominion* over creation? The word “dominion” comes from the Latin word *dominus*, or “lord.” Thus, when God gave humanity dominion over creation, he was giving humanity

⁵ Genesis 1:31

a sort of kingdom over which he could rule. Further, in this case, dominion is better understood as *stewardship* rather than kingship. A steward is one who rules over a kingdom in place of the true king. Stewards are tasked with carrying out the mission and vision of the king in his absence. In medieval times, when kings left for business abroad, they would often leave a steward in charge of their kingdom to carry on their work. Thus, while stewards were indeed lords, theirs was a special kind of lordship, a lordship involving responsibility to carry forward not their own mission, but the mission and design of the true king. This is the kind of dominion that Christians are to exercise over creation. We are called to imitate the example of the King and to respect his design.

Big problems arise when a steward forgets that he is a steward and instead acts like a king. Let's take a moment to understand the difference. A good steward guides his kingdom under the direction of the person who gave it to him: the king. A bad steward abuses his power and uses his kingdom as an instrument for his own selfish gain. Both rule their kingdom, but they do so in different ways. Unfortunately, the way most people treat the environment today resembles the second type of ruling. For them, the environment is not a sacred reality over which humanity is the steward; it is merely a tool to be manipulated. Pope Francis has said that, by disregarding the natural rules of our global ecology, modern man has severely damaged our precious global ecosystem. Reflecting on the same reality, Pope St. John Paul II said that, for modern man, "nature appears as an instrument ... a reality that he must constantly manipulate, especially by means of technology."⁶

The Catholic Church's understanding of stewardship does not allow for manipulation. You might say that where the world encourages us

⁶ John Paul II. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. 28.

to understand ourselves as *masters* and creation as mere *instrument*, the Catholic Church encourages us to view ourselves as *stewards* and creation as gift. And not just any gift, for the Church creation has an inherent design, a design which communicates God's love. In this way, creation is a kind-of sacrament. Creation is not a sacrament in the sense of the seven capital "S" Sacraments, which are official, Divinely ordained conduits of God's grace. These Sacraments have a special place in the order of grace. That said, creation is a lowercase "s" sacrament insofar as it makes God's love present on earth. Now let's be clear: The Catholic Church discourages nature worship. Creation exists to serve humanity, not vice versa. Further, humanity is infinitely more valuable than anything else in creation. Nevertheless, humanity should respect creation's design. Creation should not be approached lightly; it should be approached with a sense of wonder and awe, similar to the approach a good king takes towards his subjects. The ancient Israelites viewed creation as the handiwork of God, their true King. They knew that a healthy respect for creation's grandeur and complexity would bring about their own prosperity. For them, creation bespoke not whimsical chance, but rather the breathtaking handiwork of a divine creator. Here is just one example of the Jewish approach:

"Bless the LORD, my soul!
LORD, my God, you are great indeed!

You are clothed with majesty and splendor,
robed in light as with a cloak.

You spread out the heavens like a tent;
You raised your palace upon the waters.

You make the clouds your chariot;
You travel on the wings of the wind.

You fixed the earth on its foundation,
Never to be moved.

The ocean covered it like a garment;
Above the mountains stood the waters.

At your roar they took flight;
At the sound of your thunder they fled.

They rushed up the mountains, down the valleys
To the place you had fixed for them."⁷

Again, for the Israelites, there was an inherent order to creation, and they saw the goodness of God in this order. Sure, horrific things happened in creation, but their faith allowed them take a positive approach. Creation was not an instrument for the satisfaction of desire. Rather, creation was something to be approached with a sense of awe and reverence. Much like a good steward, the Israelites sought to work with the delicate ecology of nature, much in the same way that a good priest approaches the delicate order of the Mass. For them, creation was like a temple, in which the Lord communicated his love and power. In this way, though it rises nowhere near the importance of the Eucharist and all seven sacraments established by Christ for the Church, the Israelites possessed a *sacramental* approach to the environment.

⁷ Psalm 104:1 – 8

Application: Keepers of the Garden

Thus far, we have seen that the Christian narrative of creation is a view in which creation is essentially good, created by a single God who is also good, and that creation itself is a gift to humanity. Further, humanity possesses a certain lordship, dominion or stewardship over creation. Now that we know the basic distinction between a good and bad steward, we will now go a step further, asking once again: What does it mean to be a Christian steward?

Another way to understand our stewardship over creation is to conceive of the entire universe as a garden, a beautiful place created by God in which he seeks to meet and communicate his love to his bride, the Church. This is imagery used in Genesis in the Garden of Eden, a garden over which man is given responsibility. In creating the world, God has prepared for humans a verdant place in which to flourish — that is, if they care for that garden appropriately. Notice God's instruction in Genesis 2:15: *"The Lord God then took the man and put him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it."*⁸ Interestingly, "cultivate" comes from the root *abad*, which means "to serve, and "to take care of," comes from the root *shamar*, which means "to keep, watch, and preserve." Thus, from the very beginning of the Bible, the Lord is commanding humanity to protect and preserve the world entrusted to our care.⁹

Up to this point, this chapter has focused on Old Testament passages to trace humanity's relationship with creation, a relationship of stewardship. That said, the ultimate example of the good steward is Jesus. Christianity teaches that Christ, who is God, is the same person

⁸ Thank you to Randall Smith's "Creation and the Environment in the Hebrew Scriptures." 88. *Green Discipleship*.

⁹ Ibid.

who created the universe. When Christ became incarnate, he showed us not only the deepest nature of the universe itself, but also the manner in which it should be ruled. He showed humanity the nature of stewardship. Christ told us that the ultimate story of the universe is not the story of the Babylonians or their contemporary equivalents. The universe is not the creation of pagan gods; it is not ruled by chance, and it is much more than an instrument. On the contrary, the universe was created by the true God, a God who rules by reason and love. Creation itself is a temple that shows forth God's brilliance.

The Gospel, the greatest story ever told, is the story of God becoming man in the person of Jesus to show us how to use the gifts he gave us. In the Garden, Adam and Eve turned away from the gift that they were supposed to "till and to keep." They chose their own will over the command they received from God (their King) and thereby acted as poor stewards. In the Gospel, the Creator Himself — or the "Word"¹⁰ — both saved humanity from their sin and showed them how to reclaim the beauty of the garden. Christ, in his suffering and death, showed the sons and daughters of Adam the true meaning of "to till and to keep," or the true meaning of stewardship. True stewardship cultivates life! And not just human life, but also the life of the garden in which humanity is meant to live. The true steward takes wonder and awe at creation, cultivates creation and gives his own life to save that which He serves.

The planet is our common home, a home designed and given to us by a good King: Jesus. We are called to steward this home. Good stewards act in accord with the design of their king. Bad stewards manipulate and consume. Unfortunately, many people in today's world are bad

¹⁰ Here it is important to note that the Greek word used is *logos*, a word which, among other things, denoted the order or reason of all creation.

stewards. They disregard the environment and thereby hurt not only themselves, but also their children and future generations. Pope Francis calls out such people, encouraging them to preserve the planet for future generations:

“The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth. In many parts of the planet, the elderly lament that once beautiful landscapes are now covered with rubbish. Industrial waste and chemical products utilized in cities and agricultural areas can lead to bioaccumulation in the organisms of the local population, even when levels of toxins in those places are low. Frequently no measures are taken until after people’s health has been irreversibly affected. These problems are closely linked to a throwaway culture which affects the excluded just as it quickly reduces things to rubbish.”¹¹

During the last 100 years, with increased population, industrial economies and a “throw-away” mentality, stewardship is needed now more than ever. All of these have contributed to the very pressing problem mentioned by Pope Francis — that “a very solid scientific consensus indicates that we are presently witnessing a disturbing warming of the climatic system.”¹² This means that all of us have a great responsibility not to betray future generations, but rather to act as stewards, sacrificing our selfish desires so that those who follow may live in dignity. This leaves us with a question and a challenge: What are we doing right now to ensure the good of future generations? That is, what are we doing right now to act as good stewards?

The Catholic Church is very clear, making statements perhaps stronger than any other Christian institution: “Living our vocation to

¹¹ Francis. *Laudato Si'*. 20 – 22.

¹² *Ibid.* 23.

be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience."¹³ And the Church not only calls Christians to external action, but also to interior conversion, saying, "[T]he ecological crisis is also a summons to interior conversion."¹⁴ What does this conversion look like? Well, the Church gives us a description of the conversion, and the description has a lot in common with the wonder and awe that the Israelites articulated so many years ago:

"Various convictions of our faith ... can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore. We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that 'not one of them is forgotten before God' (Lk 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm? I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion."¹⁵

¹³ Ibid. 216.

¹⁴ Ibid. 217.

¹⁵ Francis. *Laudato Si'*. 221.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Section 1: Babylon or Israel

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

The Christian view of creation begins with wonder, and Father Georges Henri Lemaitre is a perfect example. Fr. Lemaitre was a Jesuit Catholic priest and a professor of physics at the University of Louvain. His curiosity and intellectual drive allowed for great discoveries — discoveries which benefitted not only him but also the entire human race. Among other things, Fr. Lemaitre was the first to postulate the “hypothesis of the primeval atom,” more commonly known as the “Big Bang Theory.” This and other ground-breaking advances earned him an international reputation. He was globally renowned as one of the greatest minds in mathematics and physics of his day. Once, in 1933, when presenting his theory at the California Institute of Technology, Fr. Lemaitre received a standing ovation from Albert Einstein, who exclaimed, “This is the most beautiful and satisfactory explanation of creation to which I have ever listened.”¹

1. What about this story stands out to you? Did you know that the Big Bang Theory was developed by a priest?

¹ Lambert, Dominique. “Einstein and Lemaitre: two friends, two cosmologies...” Inters.org: Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science. Date Accessed: July 28, 2020. <http://inters.org/einstein-lemaitre>. See also John Farrell's *The Day Without Yesterday: Lemaitre, Einstein, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005.

Response: Let the students discuss. The goal here is to provide students with an example of someone possessing exemplary intellectual curiosity and virtue.

2. Fr. Lemaître was filled with wonder at creation. What do you think enabled him to be filled with such wonder?

Response: Fr. Lemaître's faith enabled him to look at creation as the handiwork of a benevolent creator.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Obviously not everyone views the universe as the creation of a benevolent God. Indeed, it was in part to counter the false views of the Babylonians that motivated the Israelites to write their creation myths. One of those myths was written during the time of the Babylonian captivity.

Like most ancient civilizations, the Babylonians had gods for everything: gods of the sun, the sky, the water, even the trees. The Babylonians believed these gods had been in a long-standing war with one another and that humanity came about as a result of this war. According to the Babylonians, humans were created when a warrior god, Marduk, ordered another god to fashion human beings from the dead carcass of his defeated enemy. Marduk used the following words to “create” the human race:

“Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.
I will establish a savage, ‘man’ shall be his name.
Verily, savage-man I will create.
He shall be charged with the service of the gods
That they might be at ease!”²

² Boadt, Lawrence, Richard J. Clifford, and Daniel J. Harrington. *Reading the Old Testament: an Introduction*. 2nd ed. / rev. by Richard Clifford and Daniel Harrington. New York: Paulist Press, n.d. 91-93.

The Babylonian story is *far* different from the Christian creation accounts in Genesis. For the Babylonians, the universe was an arena for the gods to fight each other, and humanity was nothing more than a savage pawn in a divine game.

3. How would you explain a Babylonian's view of creation, in your own words?

Response: Discuss. Help guide responses to include the following: (1) the Babylonians believed in many gods; (2) they viewed humanity as pawns in the wars of the gods; and (3) the Babylonians viewed the elements as things which the gods would sometimes use to punish them.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

In contrast to the Babylonian view, the Christian view is very different. Let's look at the Christian view of creation in Scripture.

(Read Genesis 1:1 – 5.)

(Read Genesis 1:31.)

4. How does this story compare with the Babylonians?

Response: The Israelites believed the world was created by only one God, the true God, and this God thought creation was very good. It's important that students understand the profundity of this statement.

5. How did the Israelites view the relationship between God, creation and humanity? Why is this important?

Response: For the Israelites, humanity was created as good, very good! In fact, humanity was created in the image and likeness of God! Further, all of creation was given as a gift to him.

Section 2: Modern Babylonians or Christian Stewards?

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

A steward is one who rules over a kingdom in place of the true king. Stewards are tasked with carrying out the mission and vision of the king in his absence. In medieval times, when kings left for business abroad, they would often leave a steward in charge of their kingdom to carry on their work. Thus, while stewards were indeed lords, theirs was a special kind of lordship, a lordship involving responsibility to carry forward not their own mission, but the mission and design of the true king.

6. Based on this definition, what qualities would one expect of a good steward? What about a bad steward?

Response: A good steward is someone who acts in accord with the intentions of the king. A bad steward is someone who disregards the intentions of the king to feed his own selfish inclinations.

7. What are some qualities that we would expect of a bad steward? How would a bad steward treat the environment?

Response: Discuss.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

It is true that Christianity teaches that we do indeed rule over creation. Let's be clear: It is humanity that has dominion over creation, and not vice versa. Nevertheless, it is clear from the Psalms that Christians are called to have a certain reverence for that which they rule. Let's look at one of the Psalms that demonstrates this:

(Read Psalm 104:1 – 8.)

8. Do you understand the difference between nature worship (man serving nature) vs. Christian stewardship?

Response: Discuss.

Application: True Stewardship

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

Thus far, we have seen that the Christian narrative of creation is a view in which creation is essentially good, created by a single God who is also good, and that creation itself is a gift to humanity. Further, humanity possesses a certain lordship, dominion or stewardship over creation. Now that we know the basic distinction between a good and bad steward, we will now go a step further, asking once again: What does it mean to be a Christian steward?

Another way to understand our stewardship over creation is to conceive of the entire universe as a garden, a beautiful place created by God in which he seeks to meet and communicate his love to his bride, the Church. This is imagery used in Genesis in the Garden of Eden, a garden over which man is given responsibility. In creating the world, God has prepared for humans a verdant place in which to

flourish — that is, if they care for that garden appropriately. Let's look at God's command to Adam and Eve in the Garden:

(Read Genesis 2:15.)

9. What is God asking of Adam and Eve here? What might it look like for them to carry out God's command?

Response: Discuss. Help your group see a picture of Adam and Eve caring for the gift they have been given.

10. Let's look deeper at the meaning of this passage: "cultivate" comes from the root *abad*, which means "to serve, and "to take care of," comes from the root *shamar*, which means "to keep, watch, and preserve." With these meanings in mind, what did it mean for Adam and Eve to "cultivate and care for" creation? What does that mean for us today?

Response: Discuss. Help your group go deeper than the previous question and make connections to the current day.

11. Reflecting on this Bible verse, the Church has traditionally referred to man's role in creation as that of a steward. Remember, a steward acts in place of king. If we are the steward, who is the king? What can we learn from this king about stewardship?

Response: See application section of Leader's Guide. Emphasize Christ's willingness to sacrifice His own welfare for the good of others.

12. The Church says that "living our vocation to be protectors of God's handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or secondary aspect of our Christian experience." How might the world look differently, if all Christians lived out this vision for stewardship of creation?

Response: Allow students to discuss.

Note to leader: Please read aloud.

As we've seen, caring for creation affects each of us as Christians. Pope Francis emphasized this when he said:

"Various convictions of our faith...can help us to enrich the meaning of this conversion. These include the awareness that each creature reflects something of God and has a message to convey to us, and the security that Christ has taken unto himself this material world and now, risen, is intimately present to each being, surrounding it with his affection and penetrating it with his light. Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore. We read in the Gospel that Jesus says of the birds of the air that 'not one of them is forgotten before God' (Lk 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm? I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion."³

13. How do you view your relationship with the environment? Have you allowed your Christianity to influence the way that you treat the planet?

Response: Discuss.

14. What practical steps can you take this next year to ensure help protect the environment for future generations?

Response: Discuss.

³ Francis. *Laudato Si'*. 221.



Chapter V

The Family - Human Ecology

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

Pages 86 - 97

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 98 - 104

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.



Chapter VI

The Dignity and Vocation of Work

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)
Pages 106 - 115

DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)
Pages 116 - 125

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Thing: Work is a *sacred* thing. Neither the lazy man nor the workaholic glorifies God. If we are to live in dignity, then we must participate in God's act of creation by glorifying God in our work. This chapter will look closely at the following points:

- By virtue of being created in the image and likeness of God, people are called to participate in God's creative activity. They do so by working.
- As Christians we are called to imitate Christ in our work. This means uniting our work to the redemptive act of the cross. It also means heeding Saint Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to work in a good and holy way, in *quietness*, and not as a busy body.
- The sin of *acedia* produces both workaholics and lazy people. *Acedia* is a kind of interior sloth, resignation, or despondency which plagues the contemporary world.

First Section: Work in Eden

Work has a bad reputation. Everyone does it, but most people hate it. This is just as true for the average slacker as it is for the average workaholic. For the slackers of the world, work is something to be avoided at all costs. Why? Because work is oppressive. It is hard, mind-numbing, and, at least for the slacker, it should be avoided at all costs. Workaholics are different...but the same. While a workaholic might not avoid work, he often views his work in a similarly oppressive way. For the workaholic, a job is like a drug. It may be oppressive, but it provides him with an escape. Work sucks for both the lazy man and the workaholic. They just approach it differently.

This raises the question: does work have to suck? The answer, as you may have guessed, is “No.” Make no mistake, work will always involve suffering, but just because something involves suffering does not mean that it should be avoided. The Catholic Church has some interesting things to say about work. While many may think that work is a result of sin, the Church actually maintains that work existed in paradise! For the Church, work is not a product of the fall.¹ It is not something to be avoided, and (at least at its core) it is not oppressive. For the Church, work does not suck! Let’s take a look at Genesis for a deeper understanding of Church’s teaching:

This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground...²

¹ “Work is part of the original state of man and precedes his fall; it is therefore not a punishment or curse.” *Compendium. Pp 256*

² Genesis Chapter 2: 4-5

By this point you have heard this story a thousand times, but have you ever stopped to think what the creation stories might have to say about work? Think about these two verses. The passage points out the *lack* of life on the earth prior to the creation of man: “there was no field shrub...and no grass of the field,” because “there was no man to till the ground.” These passages seem to draw out a connection between human work and a healthy planet.³ It’s almost like scripture is saying that God intended to involve humanity in the creation of the world. He started creating the universe, but He waited until man was created to help finish the job. And here in lies the key truth to the Catholic Church’s key teaching on human work: to work is to participate in God’s creative act! This is nowhere clearer than when the Lord places man in the Garden of Eden:

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.⁴

The Church teaches that work “represents a fundamental dimension of human existence as **participation**...in the act of creation.” The word “participation” is key. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden to continue the act of protecting and cultivating the garden. Without Adam, the Garden of Eden would fall into disrepair. Adam’s work is crucial for the completion of creation. In this way Adam actually becomes a part of God’s creative action by cooperating with and carrying forward God’s creative design. By allowing Adam to cultivate the Garden, God has created Adam to act like Him. We have all heard about the *imago dei*, or the Church’s teaching that human beings are created in God’s image and likeness. These scripture passages show us that the *imago dei* has implications for every facet of human existence. That is, the *imago dei* has implications not only for human

³ Draw this out more but keep it short.

⁴ Genesis 2:15

nature but also for human *activity*. Human beings are not only called to *be* like God. They are also called to act with God. Though they have no power save that given them by God, human beings are called to create with God, and, as we shall see at a later point in this study, they are called to rest with God.

Second Section: Work Redeemed

If work existed in Eden and Eden did not involve any suffering, what happened to work? Clearly today's work involves suffering, so what is the difference between then and now? The answer is original sin. Recall that after Adam and Eve sinned, certain things changed:

The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done? The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it."⁵

To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, you shall not eat from it, cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles, it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.⁶

Adam and Eve sinned, and this sin changed their experience of work. It's not that work changed; rather, it is our experience that changed. Before original sin work did not involve suffering. Now, after sin, human work and indeed all human activity involves a certain amount

⁵ Genesis 3:13

⁶ Genesis 3:17-19

of suffering. Work is no longer what it used to be, but there are pros and cons to the new situation. On the one hand, work is hard. It is now more difficult to participate in God's act of creation. On the other hand, the fact that work is hard gives us an opportunity: we can unite our work to the cross! Before sin our work was a participation in God's creative act. Now, after sin, our work is not only a participation in God's act of creation, it is also a participation in God's act of redemption! Just like Jesus, we can bring about great good by virtue of our suffering! The *imago dei* now has another layer: the imitation of Christ!

As a Christian you likely know that you are created in God's image and likeness. But do you also know that you are called to *work* in God's image and likeness? After all, we are called to imitate Christ. The life of Christ gives us a great example of holy, Christian work. For this reason, holy work has always been a part of Christian spirituality. In fact, Saint Paul spoke about work in his letter to the Thessalonians:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are walking in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any such work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.⁷

Strong words! Were it not for the fact that these words come from scripture, one might be tempted to think that they're un-Christian! Now, while these words need to be taken in context and balanced against Christ's clear directives to serve the poor, we must take Saint Paul's words to heart! For now, I would like to draw out three parts of Saint Paul's words:

⁷ 2 Thessalonians 3:10

1. *The Busy Body:* Saint Paul explicitly critiques not only those who don't work, but also those who put on the appearance of doing work but actually accomplish nothing. The word used in this translation is "busy body." What is a busy body? We all know them, and some of us might be them. A busy body is who appears to work but often just ends up buzzing around, meddling in other people's business and accomplishing very little. They're usually distracted and distracting, and they generally keep other people from getting work done.
2. *The Quiet Worker:* Saint Paul explicitly compliments people who work in "quiet." What could this mean? Well, some people's professions require them to speak a lot (ex: salespeople, college professors, business managers), and Saint Paul is not condemning these professions. Given the context, it is more likely that Saint Paul is drawing a contrast between the "busy body" and the productive worker. Saint Paul is probably highlighting the person who does quality work in a humble manner.
3. *The Weary Worker:* Saint Paul warns Christians against weariness in work. It is very easy for people to grow tired, allowing a negative attitude to dampen their spirits. Saint Paul encourages Christians not to grow weary. Instead, Christians should be cheerful in their work.

As Christians we are called to take Saint Paul's words to heart. We should not be busy bodies, wasting our time in frenzied self-indulgence. Not are we called to be sullen and weary. Instead, we are called to take a deeply mystical attitude towards our work, humbly uniting our efforts to the cross.

Third Section – Acedia: The Lazy Man and the Workaholic

Excellence in work is a virtue, but just like any virtue it has both an excess and a deficiency. What does this mean? Well, if you're not familiar with virtue theory, Aristotle said that it's often the case that human beings over-do things (excess) and under-do things (deficiency). To be virtuous is to do things just right. When it comes to work, it is possible to over-do and under-do things. Sometimes we work too hard and sometimes we don't work hard enough. Some people are workaholics and others are lazy. Here it is interesting to note that, paradoxically, both laziness and workaholism have a common root: acedia. Have you ever heard this word before? It's a word that is very important for our times. We'll begin our explanation of acedia with a verse from Saint Paul on grief:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting: for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.⁸

Here Saint Paul distinguishes between two kinds of grief. The first kind (godly grief) leads to repentance. It is a holy state experienced by all healthy people. It allows for repentance and/or conversion in the face of difficulty. Godly grief (or good sorrow) allows people to turn away from bad habits. It also allows people to process tragedy in a healthy way. It allows them to process bad situations, recognize the good in them, and treat them as a means to come closer to Jesus. But there is a different kind of sorrow, and that's what we would like to talk about today. It is this kind of sorrow which produces both laziness and workaholism.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:9-10.

Saint Paul talks about “ungodly grief” which “produces death.” What does he mean? Well, Saint Thomas Aquinas used this same passage from Corinthians to explain the sin of “acedia.” Another word for acedia is “spiritual sorrow.” It isn’t good. Acedia is a kind of mistaken or misplaced sorrow, different from the good sorrow discussed above. It is being sorrowful about something which should actually cause joy, but, for the person with acedia, it actually brings despair. It often coincides with people who think of themselves, their lives, or their work as fundamentally bad. It is also common in people who feel hopelessness or meaninglessness. Acedia causes a sort of neurosis or rotting of the soul, and people struggling with acedia are sort of stuck in a rut. They have difficulty seeing any value in their own identity, life, and/or profession.

Perhaps the most common characteristic of someone struggling with acedia is a desire for *distraction*. Acedia causes sorrow: not good sorrow, but bad sorrow. Sorrow which resembles a dead end. Acedia is very common in atheists, or anyone who thinks that this life, which ends in death, is all that exists. For the atheist, reality itself is depressing. Stillness is uncomfortable. Busy-bodied distraction is better. But it is not just atheists who struggle with acedia. Acedia besets anyone who has resigned themselves to interior despondency. If you find this inside your own soul, it’s time to confront it, even though you may prefer to be distracted.

Paradoxically, this desire for distraction produces two, seemingly opposite things: laziness and workaholism. On the one hand, some people find distraction in endless entertainment. You might think, for example, of the college student who consumes exorbitant hours of frivolous entertainment (social media, video games, and TV shows). We call these people lazy. And at the heart of their laziness is a desire for distraction from sorrow. On the other hand, some people find

distraction in constant work. You might think, for example, of the business executive who finds an ever-increasing number of ways to busy himself (emails, meetings, and text messages). At the heart of his workaholicism you will find, once again, a desire for distraction. Thus, in both cases (the lazy man and the workaholic) one finds a common root: acedia. It is acedia that lies at the root of the problem. And it is acedia that needs to be confronted in our own hearts.

Do you struggle with acedia? One way to answer this question is ask whether you fall into either of the two categories mentioned above: Are you lazy? Are you a workaholic? Sometimes these qualities are difficult to spot in ourselves. For laziness, it might be helpful to look at habits like how much time you spend in front of a screen each week? For workaholicism, it might be helpful to ask how capable you are of legitimate leisure and recreation?

The ultimate question when it comes to acedia takes us right back to where we started. Are you living your life in such a way that befits your dignity as a person created in God's image? Work is deeply good thing. After all, God worked! And many of the Catholic saints were among the most productive people in human history! Some people are called to work very hard! So work, and work hard, but don't work out of a desire to distract yourself. Work with the passion of a child of God! And remember, God did not work all the time. God rested, and He calls all of us to do the same! No matter what our vocation or profession, we are all called to two, seemingly contradictory things: work and rest. But the one fulfills the other. And, as usual, it is only in the paradox of their combination that we come to realize our true nature.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

First Section: Work in Eden

1. Work has a bad reputation. Most people view it as something that you just have to do in order to pay the bills. When you guys hear the word “work” what comes to mind?

Response: Discuss.

2. The Catholic Church has another view of work. To begin understanding it, let’s take a look at Genesis. Read Genesis 2: 4-5:

“This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground.”

3. What stands out to you about this verse?

Response: Discuss. Draw out the fact that God wanted to incorporate humanity into his act of creation. In this passage we see this made concrete. The earth was, in a sense, incomplete until God made

humanity. After all, "there was no man to till the ground."

4. Now let's take a look at another verse. With the earth still incomplete, the Lord created man to help continue the project of creation. Read Genesis 2:15.
5. What can we learn from this verse?

*Response: The Church teaches that work "represents a fundamental dimension of human existence as **participation**...in the act of creation." The word "participation" is key. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden to continue the act of protecting and cultivating the garden. Without Adam, the Garden of Eden would fall into disrepair. Adam's work is crucial for the completion of creation.*

6. What does it mean to be created in God's image and likeness?

Response: Discuss. We are created as persons, just like the Divine Persons. We all have an intellect and a will. We image God as male and female etc.

7. All of the qualities discussed thus far have to do with human nature but being created in the Imago Dei also has importance for human action. Thus, we image God when we WORK. Does this make sense?

Response: Adam to cultivate the Garden, God has created Adam to act like Him. We have all heard about the imago dei, or the Church's teaching that human beings are created in God's image and likeness. These scripture passages show us that the imago dei has implications for every facet of human existence. That is, the imago dei has implications not only for human nature but also for human activity.

Human beings are not only called to be like God. They are also called to act with God. Though they have no power save that given them by God, human beings are called to create with God, and, as we shall see at a later point in this study, they are called to rest with God.

Second Section: Work Redeemed

1. Work existed in Eden, but it seems like we experienced it differently in Eden than it does now. What happened? Let's take a look at Genesis to see. Read Genesis 3: 13, 17-19:

The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done? The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it."¹

To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, you shall not eat from it, cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles, it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.²

2. Work is no longer what it used to be. Now, we suffer when we work. This is a result of original sin. But is there anything good about work now? Can we possibly make things an "oh happy fault"?

Response: Adam and Eve sinned, and this sin changed their experience of work. It's not that work changed; rather, it is our experience that changed. Before original sin work did not involve suffering. Now, after

¹ Genesis 3:13

² Genesis 3:17-19

sin, human work and indeed all human activity involves a certain amount of suffering. Work is no longer what it used to be, but there are pros and cons to the new situation. On the one hand, work is hard. It is now more difficult to participate in God's act of creation. On the other hand, the fact that work is hard gives us an opportunity: we can unite our work to the sufferings of the cross! Before sin our work was a participation in God's creative act. Now, after sin, our work is not only a participation in God's act of creation, it is also a participation in God's act of redemption! Just like Jesus, we can bring about great good by virtue of our suffering! The imago dei now has another layer: the imitation of Christ!

3. Working in imitation of Christ has been a part of Christian spirituality since the beginning. Let's read a passage from Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians 3:10-11:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are walking in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any such work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.

4. What sticks out to you about this passage?

Response: Strong words! Were it not for the fact that these words come from scripture, one might be tempted to think that they're un-Christian! Now, while these words need to be taken in context and balanced against Christ's clear directives to serve the poor, we must take Saint Paul's words to heart!

5. I would like to point out three aspects of Saint Paul's letter on work. Let's take a moment here to dwell and discuss the following three points:

- *Busy Bodies: Saint Paul explicitly critiques not only those who don't work, but also those who put on the appearance of doing work but in actuality accomplish nothing. The word used in this translation is "busy body." What is a busy body? We all know them, and some of us might be them? A busy body is who appears to work but often just ends up buzzing around, meddling in other people's business and accomplishing very little. They're usually distracted and distracting, and they generally keep people from getting work done. Do you think of yourself as a busy body when you "work"?*
- *Quietness: Saint Paul explicitly compliments people who work in "quiet." What could this mean? Well, some people's professions require them to speak a lot (ex: salespeople, college professors, business managers), and Saint Paul is not condemning these professions. Given the context, it is more likely that Saint Paul is drawing a contrast between the "busy body" and the productive worker. It's human nature, most people are prone to distraction and distracting others. And most people would do better to be a little quieter, a virtue which generally assists with genuine work. Are you able to glorify God in quiet work?*
- *Weariness: Saint Paul warns Christians against weariness in work. It is very easy for people to grow tired, allowing a negative attitude to dampen their spirits. Saint Paul encourages Christians not to grow weary. Instead, Christians should be cheerful in their work. Are you weary at work or are you cheerful?*

Third Section - Acedia: The Lazy Man and the Workaholic

1. Have you ever heard of the sin of “acedia”?

Response: Discuss. Talk about the lazy man and the workaholic and set the stage saying that both have a common root: acedia.

2. In order to understand this sin further, let’s discuss Saint Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians on grief. Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-10:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting: for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.³

3. What sticks out to you about this passage?

Response: Discuss.

4. What might Saint Paul mean by “godly grief”?

Response: Here Saint Paul distinguishes between two kinds of grief. The first kind (godly grief) leads to repentance. It is a holy state experienced by all healthy people. It allows for repentance and/or conversion in the face of a difficult situation. Godly grief (or good sorrow) allows people to turn away from bad habits and/or process the loss of a loved one. Good sorrow is the emotion experienced by the saints when they, for example, cry at funerals. It allows them to process bad situations, recognize the good in them, and treat them as a means to come closer to Jesus. But there is a different kind of sorrow, and that’s what we would like to talk about today.

³ 2 Corinthians 7:9-10.

5. What is this “worldly grief” that Saint Paul mentions?

Response: Saint Paul talks about “ungodly grief” which “produces death.” What does he mean? Well, Saint Thomas Aquinas used this same passage from Corinthians to explain the sin of “acedia.” Another word for acedia is “spiritual sorrow,” and it isn’t good. Acedia is a kind of mistaken or misplaced sorrow, different from the good sorrow discussed above. It’s being sorrowful about something which should actually cause joy.. Instead, it brings despair. It often coincides with people who think of themselves, their lives, or their work as fundamentally bad. Acedia causes a sort of neurosis or rotting of the soul, and people struggling with acedia are sort of stuck in a rut. They have difficulty seeing any value in their own identity, life, and/or profession.

6. Do you struggle with acedia? How would you know?

Response: Perhaps the most common characteristic of someone struggling with acedia is a desire for distraction. Acedia causes sorrow: not good sorrow, but bad sorrow. Sorrow which resembles a dead end and which leads to despair. The last thing these people want is stillness. Instead, they want distraction. Paradoxically, this desire for distraction produces two, seemingly opposite things: laziness and workaholism. On the one hand, some people find distraction in endless entertainment. You might think, for example, of the college student who consumes exorbitant hours of frivolous entertainment (social media, video games, and TV shows). We call these people lazy. And at the heart of their laziness you’ll often find a desire to be distracted from sorrow. On the other hand, some people find distraction in constant work. You might think, for example, of the business executive who finds an ever-increasing number of ways to busy himself (emails, meetings, and text messages). At the heart of his

workaholism you will find, once again, a desire for distraction. Thus, in both cases (the lazy man and the workaholic) one finds a common root: acedia. It is acedia that lies at the root of the problem. And it is acedia that needs to be confronted in our own hearts.

7. Do you struggle to deeply engage in your work? If so, what might this say about you?

Response: Discuss. This may indicate the sin of laziness.

8. Do you struggle to engage in leisure? If so, what might this say about you?

Response: Discuss. If someone cannot bring themselves to engage in ordinary leisure, then they probably struggle with being a workaholic.

9. How do you think you can give greater glory to God in your work?

Response: Discuss.

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