

and he is beautiful and playful
and robust and strong”.⁶⁴

88. The bishops of Brazil have pointed out that nature as a whole not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence. The Spirit of life dwells in every living creature and calls us to enter into relationship with him.⁶⁵ Discovering this presence leads us to cultivate the “ecological virtues”.⁶⁶ This is not to forget that there is an infinite distance between God and the things of this world, which do not possess his fullness. Otherwise, we would not be doing the creatures themselves any good either, for we would be failing to acknowledge their right and proper place. We would end up unduly demanding of them something which they, in their smallness, cannot give us.

V. A UNIVERSAL COMMUNION

89. The created things of this world are not free of ownership: “For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living” (*Wis* 11:26). This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind

⁶⁴ *Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, New York-London-Manila, 1999, 113-114.

⁶⁵ Cf. NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL, *A Igreja e a Questão Ecológica*, 1992, 53-54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect. Here I would reiterate that “God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement”.⁶⁷

90. This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails. Nor does it imply a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility. Such notions would end up creating new imbalances which would deflect us from the reality which challenges us.⁶⁸ At times we see an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure. Certainly, we should be concerned lest other living beings be treated irresponsibly. But we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out,

⁶⁷ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 215: *AAS* 105 (2013), 1109.

⁶⁸ Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), 14: *AAS* 101 (2009), 650.

while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. In practice, we continue to tolerate that some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights.

91. A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real if our hearts lack tenderness, compassion and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted. This compromises the very meaning of our struggle for the sake of the environment. It is no coincidence that, in the canticle in which Saint Francis praises God for his creatures, he goes on to say: “Praised be you my Lord, through those who give pardon for your love”. Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society.

92. Moreover, when our hearts are authentically open to universal communion, this sense of fraternity excludes nothing and no one. It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow

creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is “contrary to human dignity”.⁶⁹ We can hardly consider ourselves to be fully loving if we disregard any aspect of reality: “Peace, justice and the preservation of creation are three absolutely interconnected themes, which cannot be separated and treated individually without once again falling into reductionism”.⁷⁰ Everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures and which also unites us in fond affection with brother sun, sister moon, brother river and mother earth.

VI. THE COMMON DESTINATION OF GOODS

93. Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective

⁶⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2418.

⁷⁰ CONFERENCE OF DOMINICAN BISHOPS, Pastoral Letter *Sobre la relación del hombre con la naturaleza* (21 January 1987).

which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order”.⁷¹ The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property. Saint John Paul II forcefully reaffirmed this teaching, stating that “God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, *without excluding or favouring anyone*”.⁷² These are strong words. He noted that “a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples – would not be really worthy of man”.⁷³ He clearly explained that “the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, but she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them”.⁷⁴

⁷¹ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (14 September 1981), 19: *AAS* 73 (1981), 626.

⁷² Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), 31: *AAS* 83 (1991), 831.

⁷³ Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), 33: *AAS* 80 (1988), 557.

⁷⁴ *Address to Indigenous and Rural People*, Cuilapán, Mexico (29 January 1979), 6: *AAS* 71 (1979), 209.

Consequently, he maintained, “it is not in accord with God’s plan that this gift be used in such a way that its benefits favour only a few”.⁷⁵ This calls into serious question the unjust habits of a part of humanity.⁷⁶

94. The rich and the poor have equal dignity, for “the Lord is the maker of them all” (*Prov* 22:2). “He himself made both small and great” (*Wis* 6:7), and “he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” (*Mt* 5:45). This has practical consequences, such as those pointed out by the bishops of Paraguay: “Every *campesino* has a natural right to possess a reasonable allotment of land where he can establish his home, work for subsistence of his family and a secure life. This right must be guaranteed so that its exercise is not illusory but real. That means that apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets”.⁷⁷

95. The natural environment is a collective good, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone. If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good

⁷⁵ *Homily at Mass for Farmers*, Recife, Brazil (7 July 1980): *AAS* 72 (1980): *AAS* 72 (1980), 926.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, 8: *AAS* 82 (1990), 152.

⁷⁷ PARAGUAYAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, Pastoral Letter *El campesino paraguayo y la tierra* (12 June 1983), 2, 4, d.

of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others. That is why the New Zealand bishops asked what the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” means when “twenty percent of the world’s population consumes resources at a rate that robs the poor nations and future generations of what they need to survive”.⁷⁸

VII. THE GAZE OF JESUS

96. Jesus took up the biblical faith in God the Creator, emphasizing a fundamental truth: God is Father (cf. *Mt* 11:25). In talking with his disciples, Jesus would invite them to recognize the paternal relationship God has with all his creatures. With moving tenderness he would remind them that each one of them is important in God’s eyes: “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God” (*Lk* 12:6). “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them” (*Mt* 6:26).

97. The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder. As he made his way throughout the

⁷⁸ NEW ZEALAND CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE, *Statement on Environmental Issues* (1 September 2006).