In this final session, I want to turn to the message of *Laudato Si’* to the place of ecology in pastoral ministry. Two chapters address pastoral outreach: Chapter 5 on dialogue, and Chapter 6 on education and spirituality. In some ways, Chapter 5, “Lines of Approach and Action,” applies more on the level of the bishops’ conference and dioceses than to parish ministry. But you will be invited to join in programs sponsored by dioceses and the USCCB, and you will need to be prepared to collaborate with those broader programs and to implement them in parishes and with other communities of faith, including your own parish peace and justice committees and grassroots Catholic groups looking for support and guidance.

Chapter 6, on education and spirituality, is an easier fit, and I will have some things to point out about it later. But encounter and dialogue, while *Laudato Si’* applies the term broadly to building relationships--among nations, across national and local
communities, between politics and economics and between religion
and science—deserve attention because they are distinctive to Pope
Francis’s own pastoral style and a skill he wants pastoral workers
to cultivate for themselves. It is also a pastoral strategy about
which all clergy, not just Catholics, are anxious. It is a skill we need
all the more as our parishioners are better educated and hold more
responsible positions in society. We need adult catechesis to form
adult Christians, and encounter and dialogue are essential to the
fostering of adult faith.

Some twenty years ago as the U.S. bishops sought to
implement their own environmental pastoral “Renewing the Earth,”
they joined with the National Council of Churches, Jewish and
Evangelical groups in the National Religious Partnership for the
Environment. In time it became clear that there was one problem
area in which we religious groups were not acting but in which it
was very appropriate for religion to take an active role, namely,
consumerism and lifestyle change.

The partnership ran focus across denominations and with
subgroups like African-American Protestants and Hispanic
Catholics. In all focus groups, the congregants found the church or
synagogue the appropriate place to discuss the moral aspects of the environmental crisis. They felt it a safe place for open discussion. They also quickly made connections between lived problems they faced in their communities with consumption and the environment. What we found, however, was that pastors felt unprepared to lead such discussions, and they were uneasy about empowering lay members of the community to lead such discussions. What they feared was provoking conflict within the community and perhaps displeasing donors.

**Examples from the U.S. Church**

American Catholics have a lot of experience with hosting dialogue on public problems. My first experience came in Berkeley after the publication of the 1983 bishops’ peace pastoral, “The Challenge of Peace.” At the urging of nuclear scientists at Lawrence Livermore Labs, Bishop John Cummins of Oakland for several years brought together the scientists together with theologians and ethicists to discuss the morality of nuclear weapons production. It was still the height of the Cold War, but some scientists changed the direction of their research from weapons development to proliferation control and verification, and the labs themselves changed much of their
research to look at energy problems rather than weapons production alone.

One of the pioneers in diocesan-wide, parish-deep dialogue on the environment was the Diocese of Houma-Thibodeaux on the Gulf coast of Louisiana. The coast is eroding at the rate of a football field a day. This was not just due to global climate change, but also more particularly to the subsidence of land due to the depletion of subsurface oil reserves. Subsidence affected other income producers in the region, the watermen who relied on salt marsh and bayous to cultivate shrimp, mollusks and fish, and farmers whose soil, when it hadn’t disappeared, was poisoned by salinization. As it turned out, all the actors, the oilmen, the watermen and the farmers, were all parishioners. And so, the diocese brought them together to search for common solutions. The function of the diocese and the parish was to convene conversations in which the actors encountered one another and where their faith gave them a shared basis for assessing and solving their common problems.

A third example is the Church in the City program of the Diocese of Cleveland. There Bishop Anthony Pilla convoked a process that created dialogue across the diverse regions of the
diocese: the old urban core, older suburbs, new upscale suburbs and rural areas. The original concern was the hollowing out of the inner city, but as they began to look at their problems the parishioners discovered all sorts of shared concerns. After a time they were identified as “urban sprawl,” but that covered a multitude of issues: loss of open space, declining water and air quality, commuter traffic. There were three rounds of meetings which led to an ambitious implementation plan.

The Church in the City was picked up by several other dioceses in the Great Lakes Basin. With the help of small grants from the bishops’ conference, many initiatives were taken up, and some projects even obtained international recognition.

My point is that the church has a special role to play in convening dialogues on social issues among diverse groups. Pastors don’t necessarily have to take the lead themselves. If they have the skill and the opportunity to lead such exercise, by all means they should do so. They must, however, at the very least, be willing to empower lay people in undertaking the work and be ready to provide encouragement to the process.
Encounter and Dialogue

Before I address the pastoral role of dialogue, I want to say a word about ‘encounter,’ because dialogue is one face of the culture of encounter Pope Francis is promoting. ‘Encounter’ is one of the words you hear often from Pope Francis and read in his texts. The word originates from French philosophical circles. It refers to face-to-face, eye-to-eye meetings. But, in Pope Francis’s usage, it has parallels to Buber’s I-Thou, where there is “a symmetrical co-presence” between the two persons or between a person and God. For Pope Francis, encounter means meeting the whole person, especially as subject with his or her own desires, convictions and choices. It is in that subjectivity that we especially discover the otherness of the Thou. But, for Francis, the encounter is never a meeting of pure subjects. We also encounter others in the flesh, face to face and eye to eye, and especially in their suffering, and with their cares and anxieties. One line from Evangelii gaudium catches the meaning of encounter best. It reads, encounter is to “accept and esteem [others] as companions on the way, without interior resistance.” Acceptance and esteem are fundamental, but the bit of spiritual insight the Holy Father adds is striking. We must
meet the other “without interior resistance.”¹ That means overcoming any residual hesitation or resistance in ourselves. We should learn to see the face of Jesus in others, accepting ingratitude and even injustice, “never tiring, he says, of living in fraternity.”²

An attitude of encounter is essential to dialogue, and dialogue is integral to evangelization. Pope Francis gives us a glimpse of his personal understanding in Evangelii gaudium, particularly in his advice on preaching. “The preacher must know the heart of his community,” he writes, “in order to realize where its desire for God is alive and ardent and, as well, where that dialogue, once loving, has been thwarted and is now barren.”³ You might say, therefore, encounter is the meeting of souls. For that reason, it requires a set of particular virtues: “approachability, readiness for dialogue, warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental.”⁴

The paradigm of encounter is cura animarum, the pastoral care of souls taught by Gregory the Great in his Liber regulae pastoralis, or Pastoral Care in English. Its principle themes remind me of the ministerial style of Pope Francis: (1) each case requires variable response; (2) for every virtue there is a
corresponding vice; (3) the pastor mirrors Christ’s care for us, and (4) authority is validated by humble service. Let me repeat. . . .

For Pope Francis as for Gregory dialogue is not just a method for guiding the simple faithful, but also those in authority and even those who threaten the peace and good order of society. Both in *Evangelii gaudium* and *Laudato Si’* he identifies special groups with whom pastors, and the church more broadly, need to dialogue as groups within society who should be dialoguing with one another. *Laudato Si* addresses dialogue in various sectors of society: the world community, national and local communities, between the public and decision-makers, between politics and economics, and between religion and science.

Of course, the pastoral strategy of dialogue across society cannot obviously have one to one correspondence with an I-Thou encounter, nonetheless it informs how dialogue is conducted. While the Holy See has a seat in most international fora, the Church as such does not have a place at those meetings. But, as we can see from the participation of experts in the preparation of *Laudato Si’* and its reception by all sorts of international organizations, activist groups and affected peoples around the globe, the Church’s moral
witness is welcome, and its moral teaching is treated seriously even by those who disagree on some points.

Similarly, with specialized groups, like scientists, there may be residual hostility among some, but scientists have welcomed the Church’s involvement. My first day on the job at the bishops’ conference was spent at the Museum of Natural History in New York attending a conference entitled The Call of Science and Religion for the Environment. One of the primary movers was the late astronomer Carl Sagan, who some suspected of aspiring to be a secular pope, if not the Messiah. But Sagan later hung with us in the religious community in The National Religious Partnership for the Environment, clearly convinced that America’s religious communities were essential to building moral awareness of the environmental crisis which Saint John Paul had raised up as a high concern in his 1990 World Day of Peace Message.

Whether it is scientists, economists, environmentalists or politicians, most will engage in dialogue. We shouldn’t judge them or lightly dismiss them. As Pope Francis writes, we should welcome them and deal with them in a spirit of openness.
From personal experience I can say, you can’t always tell where a person really stands or what is transpiring in her conscience. It is as true of students and spiritual directees as of world renowned experts; you may not be able to tell what people think on the surface of your encounter. Sometimes they are testing you, especially your openness and goodwill. At other times, they may need time to sort out what they believe themselves or what they may want to do in response to a moral challenge.

I have found that in teaching the morality of war, for example, the most hawkish-sounding questions come from the pacifists and practitioners of nonviolence. When I taught at Notre Dame, one of my students was a South African Anglican priest Malusi Mpluana. He was constantly asking my thoughts about necklacing, a particularly horrible form of lynching in which suspected collaborators with the Apartheid regime had tires filled with gasoline placed around their necks and then set afire. I felt he was looking for me to justify this horrific form of vigilante justice. It turned out that Malusi, who had been a leader in the Black Consciousness Movement, had been converted to nonviolence during a three-hour torture session, where he was tied to a spit
called “the heliocopter” that turned and turned and turned. When he returned from prison committed to nonviolence, he lost his leadership position in the movement. Today he is an Anglican bishop and is charged with re-building the historic South African Council of Churches. So, don’t dismiss even those who seem to be provoking you.

What matters in dialogue is that we as pastors listen to our interlocutors, show we take the big issues seriously (and avoid logic-chopping and cross examination), share our thought and our questions with them and demonstrate a willingness to listen and learn from them. As Cardinal Newman’s motto said, *cor ad cor loquitur*, heart speaks to heart.

**Building a Culture of Dialogue in the Parish**

The larger our parishes grow, and with consolidation some are very large, the more difficult it for a pastor or even a vicar to become engaged in dialogue with all the groups that can profit from it. The pastor doesn’t have to be personally engaged in every dialogue. What he should do is to create a climate of dialogue in the parish and empower parishioners, particularly those with good group skills and moral concerns, to guide discussion in the parish community.
One approach to creating the climate of dialogue is to think of the parish as what James Gustafson called “a community of moral discourse.” Gustafson wrote primarily of the so-called voluntary Protestant congregational community, but he admired the continuity of moral discourse the Catholic Church provides, especially in the body of its Social Teaching.

I believe, with Pope Francis’s insistence on dialogue, Catholic parishes too can and ought to be “communities of moral discourse.” As Gustafson points out, on the whole the universities have surrendered their role as sources of moral judgment, voluntary organization usually focus on a narrow set of pertinent issues, as say the Knights of Columbus focus on pro-life issues or Catholic Charities on emergency relief and aid to people in need. The Church remains the one place where people expect to be able to discuss moral issues, and in the Catholic Church, where there is a history of moral discourse, it is especially appropriate to do so.

I have already noted how parishioners feel the parish is an appropriate place for moral dialogue. What would that mean? For one, it would involve serious study of Catholic social teaching. Second, it would involve inviting talks, lectures and forums, to
provide scholarly and scientific background to the topics the community will discuss. Third, it would involve free and open discussion in a prayerful atmosphere in a spirit of charity.

The role of the priest or the discussion leader—and one responsibility of the pastor, as I have said, is to promote responsible, skilled lay leaders—is to foster a context of open, prayerful discussion in the group or groups. A primary duty is to encourage attentive listening on the part of the participants. He or she should keep the discussion moving and focused and ask someone to sum up the main points. In addition, the pastor or lay leader should remind the group of church teaching, pertinent data and expert conclusions, but only when discussion becomes unmoored and never in a way which lays a heavy hand on the discussion. The place for teaching with authority is elsewhere: in the homily, sacramental preparation, adult religious education, lectures and so on.

Gustafson believed that ministers, in the case of Protestant congregations, should also take a prophetic role in the process of community discernment. That’s a role with some exceptions that most clergy, whether Catholic, Protestant or Jewish, as I have said,
are reluctant to play out of fear of creating conflict and division in the community. “[T]he minister can lead in the deliberations which move toward a moral consensus in the community,” writes Gustafson, “as the participant who contributes concern and questions pertaining toward the right and the good . . . he may be able to re-shape the questions . . . by his own moral sensibility and his practiced moral deliberation.”

The role of the Catholic pastor or group leader ought to be make space for prophetic opinion in the group to be heard by asking questions and occasionally offering a prophetic discussant with a supporting opinion, because opinions that are un-seconded are seldom “heard.”

**Communities of Discernment**

In Catholic communities there is another context where moral discourse with a consciously prophetic edge can take place, namely, communities of discernment of the Signs of the Times. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World identified discernment of the Signs of the Times as a duty for the whole Church. Pope Paul VI in *Octogesima adveniens*, the apostolic letter “A Call to Action,” described those communities, their sources,
deliberative style, and practical purpose, namely, “to discern the options and commitments which are called for in order to bring about the social, political and economic changes seen in many cases to be urgently necessary.” Communities of discernment are not just discussion groups. Their activity is a form of praxis, the effort to change the world by light of the gospel. So, a communal reading of the signs of the times unlike the community of moral discourse, aims not just at a consensus around a considered opinion but rather at deciding on common program of action.

The Signs of the Times method, however, envisages not just parishes but a variety of communities. It is reasonable to say even within the formal parish, it anticipated the parish as what Ecclesia in America described as a “community of communities and movements.” Quoting the synod’s Proposition 46, Saint John Paul II insisted then, as Pope Francis does today, that parishes must be “welcoming and fraternal . . . open to the full range of charisms, services and ministries, organized in a communal and responsible way, capable of using existing movements of the apostolate, attentive to the diversity of people, open to pastoral projects that go beyond the individual parish, and alert to the world in which they
live.”12 The pastor, Pope John Paul advised, should have “a father’s heart, [be] capable of fostering spiritual life, preaching the Gospel and promoting cooperation.” To emphasize the people skills needed by pastors in the contemporary parish, Pope John Paul added, “the pastor [should be] able to work with others.”13

Pope Francis has revived Paul VI’s teaching on communities of discernment. Like Paul, he invokes the impossibility of providing universally applicable judgments and the corresponding need for local or regional decisions.14 He explains, “I do exhort all the communities to ‘an every watchful scrutiny of the signs of the times.’ This is in fact a grave responsibility,” he adds, “since certain present realities, unless effectively dealt with, are capable of setting off processes of dehumanization, which would then be hard to reverse.”15

Though I don’t have time to elaborate on them, two further comments are in order on the pastoral guidance of these communities of discernment. First, within the church there is room for a variety of practical, and that also means political, options. The principles of Catholic Social Teaching can be implemented in a variety of ways.16 Two, for that reason, every effort must be taken to
preserve the bonds of charity between those who make different options. That’s the challenge of pastoring in the twenty-first century: to build communities of moral discourse and discernment while at the time preserving the bonds of unity, protecting the Church from divisiveness of the culture wars even as we advance the Church’s program of social-pastoral action.

**Dialogue on the Environment**

Much of the dialogue on the environment will be the dialogue of others, like that in the international community at COP21 in Paris next month or those between business, environmentalists and economists, on which pastors can draw to educate their parishioners. Discernment requires knowledge of data, scientific findings and alternative policy proposals. That is information which the parish should access through broad, general lectures and through talks at close quarters with the parish council, justice and peace committees and interested groups of parishioners.

At the elite levels, you shouldn’t spurn involvement with scientific groups, planning boards and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue when you are invited to do so, and, if you are so interested, engaging in them is a legitimate ministry. Friendships
with scientists, environmentalists and politicians can open up new horizons and opportunities. In Berkeley, the Catholic and other concerned scientists at Livermore sought out Bishops Cummins and the rest of us to shed light on their questions and help at talking them through. As a result of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, I became involved with a group of environmental policy makers in the federal government eager for spiritual friendship as a resource in dealing with their high-pressure jobs. For several years I helped convene monthly interfaith spiritual conversation groups and retreats for them, and I count many of them as close friends to this day. I encourage you not to resist such opportunities, but to take them up for the sake of the Kingdom.

Most dialogue at the parish level, however, will concern what Pope Francis writes about as “ecological conversion,” particularly aspects of lifestyle change. Pope Francis raises up issues of consumption and simplicity of life, areas where ecological pressures and traditions of Christian spirituality meet. In an interesting twist, he identifies questions of ecological devastation with that of spiritual desolation. He takes up a famous line from Pope Emeritus
Benedict, named in his day “the Green Pope.” It reads, “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast”. Pope Francis comments, “The emptier a person’s heart is,” he writes, “the more he or she needs things to buy, own and consume.”

In hope of preparing the church’s pastors to lead in this area, he expresses hope that “our seminaries and houses of formation will provide an education in responsible simplicity of life, in grateful contemplation of God’s world, and in concern for the needs of the poor and the protection of the environment.”

Can you see yourself taking the Holy Father’s advice? Can you see yourself leading a parish in discussions and initiatives on environment?

Pope Francis also points to a number of pastoral options that rely on traditional customs like grace at mealtime and observance of the Sabbath rest to arouse ecological sensibilities. “Rest opens our eyes to the larger picture and gives us renewed sensitivity to the rights of others,” reads Laudato Si’. “And so, the day of rest, centered on the Eucharist, sheds its light on the whole week, and motivates to greater concern for nature and the poor.”
The parish can also directly model ecological responsibility with proper management and design. Church management, *oikonomia* in Greek, can provide important models, with energy audits, energy efficiency programs, land surveys, purchasing policies, and so on. Another front brings together the environmental with the aesthetic, a mix which allows for parish education, catechesis, sacramental preparation and homiletics on ecological theology and ethics. Francis, as I have said, places special value on beauty as a way to open hearts to responsibility for the natural world. He writes,

> By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple.²³

Landscaping, use of water resources, a blending of human and natural spaces, the creation of prayer spaces in the open, can all contribute to increased environmental sensitivity and responsibility.

*Let me conclude then with a work of beauty, Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Pied Beauty.*
Glory be to God for dappled things –
   For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
   For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
   Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
   And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
   Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
   With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
   Praise him.

1 Evangelii gaudium, no. 91.
2 Ibid.
3 EG, no. 137.
4 EG, no. 165.
7 Gustafson, 93.
8 Gustafson, 95.
9 Gaudium et Spes, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World . . . nos. 4 and 11.
10 Octagesima adveniens in O’Brien and Shannon, eds., Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Tradition (Orbis, 2010), no. 4.
11 John Paul II, Ecclesia in America, (Vatican, 1999) no. 41.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid; EG, no. 51.
15 Ibid.
16 OA, nos. 50-51.
17 OA, no 50.
18 On ecological conversion see LS, nos. 216-221; and on lifestyle changes, nos. 202-208.
19 LS, no. 217.
20 LS, no. 204.
21 LS, no. 214.
22 LS, no 237.
23 LS, no. 215.