**Talk No. 1:**

**Poverty and Creatureliness**

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

*King Lear*, Act 3, Scene 4

I invite you to travel with me to sunny Umbria, where the favored son of the town is known for his cheerful songs, his wandering band of friends and his love of nature. As Pope Francis tells us, he took the “little poor man” (il Poverello) of Assisi as his “guide and inspiration when [he] was elected Bishop of Rome.” He explains, “Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology . . . . He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.”¹ It is what he calls “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet” I would like to explore with you during this day of recollection.²
Fellow Creatures

The encyclical “On Care of Our Common Home” takes its name from the first line of Saint Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures*, “Laudato Si’, mi Signore.” “Be praised, my Lord, for all your creatures.” Like the psalmists and wisdom writers before him, Francis invited the whole creation to join him in a hymn of praise.³ “Just as happens when we fall in love with someone,” writes Pope Francis, “whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise.”⁴ Pope Francis continues, “His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection.”⁵

We use the phrase “fellow creature” rather casually, to designate not just belonging to the same class of being, but more to indicate a certain fellow feeling, a sensibility for the fragility of others. Francis had a special feeling for the brokenness of things and the vulnerability of others. His first call from the San Damiano Cross to repair the Church set him to re-building ruined chapels
and churches like San Damiano. The threshold of his conversion was his encounter with a leper, the quintessential figure of human vulnerability. He dramatized that sense of creaturely vulnerability in other ways too.

**Nakedness and Creaturehood**

Lawrence Cunningham in his *Francis of Assisi: The Performance of the Gospel Life* observes that one of the excesses of Francis’s gospel performance was his repeated nakedness: his stripping himself before his father, Pietro, and Bishop Guido; again, stripping on a preaching tour as a symbol of humility, and at the end, at his own request, being laid naked on the soil as he died. One interpretation, with the warrant of Saint Bonaventure, is that nakedness was Francis evocation of Edenic innocence. Like Adam, Francis was unashamed and pure in spirit. There may also be an echo of God’s command to Isaiah to preach “naked and unshod.”

The more likely interpretation, given Francis’s life-long identification with Christ, however, is that he was “nakedly following the naked Christ.” Like Christ’s descent into human form, nakedness for Francis was an expression of his being a fellow
creature with the wretched of the earth and the earth itself.

“Humility,” after all, is derived from the Latin “humus” for earth, evoking the image of the lowly peasant bent over the earth he must till. In his humility, Francis, identifies with the poor who must toil and beg for their living and with earth through which God bestows so many gifts.

I think of Shakespeare’s King Lear on the heath, mad and naked, after being betrayed by his elder daughters Regan and Goneril. In his madness, he sees the truth that kings are but creatures like other men. In his nakedness, he is one with the “poor naked wretches” with “houseless heads and unfed sides.” The abdicate king confesses, “O, I have ta'en/Too little care of this!” That is, he has failed to take note of the painful vulnerability of ordinary people. He then rejects his royal station and exclaims,

Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

“Expose thyself to what wretches feel.” Shakespeare understood what Francis lived: the creatureliness we humans share with one another, a condition the poor experience more acutely as a matter of routine. It is
a condition we humans share with all created beings which come from
the hand of God. Francis “appreciated” this truth not just as theological
premise, but as a lived reality, because “every creature was united to
him as a sister by the bonds of affection.”

In his Testament, Francis reports the lepers played the same
role for him that the homeless figures battered by the storm did for
Lear. They tore away the aspiring upper-middle-class pretensions
in which he had been raised, and they revealed to him the common
human condition. “Because I was in sin,” he wrote, “it was a very
bitter thing for me to see a leper. And the Lord himself led me
among them, and I practiced mercy among them. And, leaving
them, what had seemed bitter to me, became sweetness of body
and soul.”

Henceforth, Boff points out, Francis left the upper class, the
maiores, into which he had been born, and he became a minor, one
with the lower, property-less classes, and a brother to all. He
made himself as vulnerable as they were, and more so, with his
itinerant preaching and mendicancy. In the Regula Non-Bullata,
the early, unapproved rule he wrote for his order, he counseled his
brothers, “[F]eel satisfied to be among the common and rejected people, the poor, the weak, the sick, the lepers, and the beggars of the street.”

**Spiritual Ecology and Liberation From the Economy of Domination**

In his interpretation of the biblical tradition and its distortions in the theological tradition in *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis makes clear that protection of the environment demands renunciation of the spirit of domination over the physical world. The harmony between God, human beings and nature present in creation became “conflictual” by virtue of human domination of the physical world. “We are not God,” writes the Holy Father, “The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. . . . The responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria between creatures of this world. . . .”

The so-called Dominion Theory was never as strong in Catholic theology as in certain strands of Protestant and Evangelical thought. The sacramental tradition preserved a reverence for nature among Catholics until quite late in the
modern period. But as participants in industrial culture, upwardly mobile Catholics shared in the benefits of exploitation of the natural world and, as they ascended to the upper classes frequently came to share its assumptions too. Meeting what Saint John Paul II called “the ecological crisis” requires renouncing the spirit of domination.

A quarter century ago the late pope wrote:

Often, the interests of production prevail over concern for the dignity of workers, while economic interests take priority over the good of individuals and even entire peoples. In these cases, pollution or environmental destruction is the result of an unnatural and reductionist vision which at times leads to a genuine contempt for man.¹⁰

Similarly, Pope Francis writes in *Laudato Si’*:

It would be a mistake to view other living beings as mere objects subjected to arbitrary human domination. When nature is viewed as a source of profit and gain, this has serious consequences for society. This vision of “might is right” has engendered inequality, injustice and acts of violence
against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first come or the most powerful: the winner-take-all.\textsuperscript{11}

The culture of domination makes no distinctions. It exploits both humans and nature. Since Bacon and Descartes, and especially since the time of the “worldly philosophers” who gave us classical economics, analytic reason has allowed for the control of nature and the exploitation of human labor until it brought the successive waves of ecological crisis, culminating in Global Climate Change.\textsuperscript{12}

Both Saint John Paul II and Pope Emeritus Benedict, like Pope Francis, recognized the alienation resulting from the forms of economic life underlying the environmental crisis. John Paul noted that economic alienation was not limited to pre-Marxist capitalist systems. In \textit{Sollicitudo rei socialis}, as he had in \textit{Laborem exercens}, he identified the varied experiences of alienation in advanced capitalist and late Communist economies.\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Centesimus annus}, he also argued the phenomena of exploitation and alienation Marx had described persisted, though in different expressions at different times and in different economic systems, and, in
particular, he maintained that the notions of “exploitation” and especially “alienation” remained valid concepts for Christian social analysis. He made them repeatedly the substance of his reading of the signs of the times.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis places special emphasis on the combination of the consumer economy and technological development as a force multiplier in the ecological crisis. “The economy,” he writes, “accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potential negative impacts on human beings (and the environment).”

Pope Francis is not an enemy of technology or reason. He is a critic of “the technocratic paradigm,” the pervasive mindset that believes that human beings through the application of analytic reason are able to control the natural world to meet specific human ends, increasingly synonymous with wants rather than needs. Technocratic consumerism is particularly pernicious because technology multiplies the consumption of natural resources without heed for the consequences. There are echoes here of the great French Calvinist social critic Jacques Ellul in his book *The
Technological Society, *La Technique* in French. Pope Francis doesn’t share Ellul’s cultural pessimism, but in the Frenchman’s description of the relentless logic of the technological society readers will find the pope’s technological paradigm writ large.

Reversing the environmental crisis involves more, Pope Francis believes, than attacking individual eco-problems, like ”pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources.” What is needed is:

a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, and educational program, a lifestyle and a spirituality that together generate resistance to the assault of the technological paradigm.

Ecology teaches us that everything is interconnected, and so, he tells us, our solution must be an integrating one. We need a holistic way of approaching life. “[W]e do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way,” the pope says in *Laudato Si’,* “to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.”
Can we escape the reductionism of the technological paradigm that degrades human work and despoils the environment? Francis believes we can. “An authentic humanity, calling for a new synthesis, seems to dwell in the midst of our technological culture, almost unnoticed,” he writes, “like a mist seeping gently beneath a closed door.”21 “There is a kind of salvation,” he adds, “in beauty.”22

**Beauty and Self-Denial**

“By learning to see and appreciate beauty,” he observes, “we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism.”23 Beauty, natural beauty especially, plays many roles in *Laudato Si’*, but here Pope Francis refers to beauty as a spiritual propaedeutic to ecological conversion.

Like Hans Urs von Bathasar, for Pope Francis beauty allows humans access to the divine glory. As he notes a number of times, beauty engages the whole personality in ways that intellect alone does not. But beauty also involves objectivity to a degree detached rationality does not do. “Rather than a problem to be solved, the world is a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise.”24
Pope Francis quotes Saint Bonaventure, “contemplation deepens the more we feel the working of God’s grace within our hearts, and the better we learn to encounter God in creatures outside ourselves.”

Like contemplation, aesthetic experience opens us to the intrinsic value of other creatures, so we can interact with them while we are also respectful of their worth and dignity. Pope Francis explains:

If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously.

In Saint Francis Pope Francis sees the two sides of an integrated personality: aesthetic enjoyment and ascetic self-denial.

The Poverello was a little brother to every creature because he refused to impose himself on others and control them. Whether it was wildflowers, birds, wolves, pain or even death, Saint Francis let them
be, respecting the dignity of each. “The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism,” writes the Holy Father, “but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”

The self-abnegation required for human encounter applies all the more to our meetings with the poor. “Every genuine human encounter must be inspired by poverty of spirit,” writes J. B. Metz in his spiritual classic *Poverty of Spirit*. “We must forget ourselves in order to let the other person approach us. We must be able to open up to him, to let his distinctive personality unfold—even though it frightens or repels us.”

Metz describes the sort of objectivity that attends both the contemplative experience of beauty and that found in worship. It spells out, I think, how our capacity to participate in what Pope Francis describes as “the joyful mystery of the world” through a stilling of the relentless ego and, for lack of a better phrase, the opening up of the soul:

All the great experiences of life—freedom, encounter, love, death are worked out in the silent turbulence of an
impoverished spirit. . . . [The human being] becomes suddenly humble when he is overcome by love. . . . As a man draws near to his real wellsprings, his thoughts become devout, his understanding mellows, and his words slacken. His judgment becomes reserved and his objectivity becomes reverent.

At such moments, Metz continues,

We are brought, not only in “thought,” but in the totality of our Being, before the great mystery which touches the roots of our existence and encircles our spirit even before it is brought home to us with full force. . . . We dimly begin to realize that we are poor, that our power and strength are derived from the wellsprings of invisible mystery.

“The ultimate word of impoverished man,” writes Metz, “is ‘Not I, but Thou,’” that is a reverent confession of the Creator.29 For us, as for Saint Francis, mysticism and asceticism are two sides of one experience: our essential poverty as creatures of God. “We are not God,” says Laudato Si.’ “The earth was here before us, and it has been given to us (in trust).30

**Spiritual Poverty and the Dignity of God’s Creatures**
Saint Francis was considerate of the smallest creature, and he made himself brother to the poor, for the same reason: He intuited his fraternity with them as creatures of “the Most High God.” Unlike other pauperist movements of his times, Saint Francis did not look to the early church with its sharing of goods as his ideal. Rather, he looked to the ministry of Jesus, and he took Jesus radical statements about poverty, like the commission to preach “without money, without purse, without bread, without a staff for the road, without sandals, and without spare clothing” as directed to him personally.31 In his following of Christ, writes Leonardo Boff, the text of 2 Cor: 8-9 was central for Francis. It reads, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, in his goodness, being rich became poor for our sake that we may be made rich through his poverty.”32

When we look to take the part of the poor, we must expect to be changed, because we are appropriating the fundamental truth about ourselves that we are creatures of God. Saint Francis saw the face of Christ in the poor. “Human beings too,” writes Pope Francis, “are creatures of this world, enjoying a right to life and happiness, and endowed with unique dignity. For this reason, the
pope argues, “[W]e cannot fail to consider the effects on people’s lives of environmental deterioration, current models of development and the throwaway culture.”

“We face one complex crisis which is both social and environmental,” Pope Francis contends. “Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.”

The human inclination to create and contemplate beauty, Pope Francis believes, enables us to grasp the dignity of all God’s creatures and especially that of the poor. “Integral ecology” is a pre-eminent case of the classic Catholic answer, “both and”: both justice for the poor and healing for the planet.

From the beginning Catholic environmentalism has refused to draw a line between protection of the environment and protection of the poor. The U.S. bishops’ 1991 pastoral “Renewing the Earth” assigned special importance to environmental justice and identified “the preferential option for the poor” as one of the principles of Catholic environmentalism. Catholic organizations, like CRS, Catholic Charities and the Catholic Campaign for Human
Development, have focused their green activities on the environmental difficulties faced by the poor. And the National Religious Partnership for the environment, of which the USCCB was a member, focused many of its projects on environmental problems facing the poor, such as brownfields, that is, toxic waste in de-industrialized areas neighborhoods where the poor live, on the toxic exposure of workers in maquiladoras on the Mexican border, and mitigation of ocean erosion for low-income island and coastal states.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis is no exception to this “both-and” Catholic outlook on the environment. There are no fewer than 63 references to the poor in the encyclical, and the majority speaks of the numerous ways in which the poor are adversely affected by environmental degradation: homes, neighborhoods and livelihoods threatened by global warming; illness due to polluted water supplies; the depletion of marine fisheries; the loss of arable land due to desertification; the failure of law enforcement and regulation to protect poor neighborhoods and regions; the failure of environmental program to find equitable remedies for
environmental problems, and lack of provision for environmental refugees. The list goes on.

**Action Steps for Ourselves**

Given the enormity of the problems, what can we do to be “a church for and of the poor” in the midst of the present crisis? Let me propose three:

1) It is our duty to make Catholic Social Teaching our own: To read and study the documents and discern their applicability to our lives, our institutions, our political commitments and our country. (It goes without saying CST ought to be part of seminary curricula and inform priestly formation programs.)

2) We need to test our readiness to accept poverty of spirit, to dispossess ourselves of any sense of self-sufficiency, of close-mindedness and of reluctance to give of ourselves. Those are sins for which we ought to examine ourselves and confess.

We should adopt for ourselves a contemplative attitude toward the poor and the environment, to allow ourselves to see the beauty of creation and of broken humanity, and we should be prepared for it to elicit from us responses of tenderness and care.
3) Befriend a poor or vulnerable group, participate in its life. If possible, join its self-help and community organizing efforts. Remember what Latin Americans call social-pastoral ministry among the needy and marginalized is essential to ministering as a priest of Jesus Christ, who, “in his goodness, being rich became poor for our sake that we may be made rich through his poverty.”

**Conclusion: Ecological Conversion**

Johannes Metz concludes his essay *Poverty of Spirit* this way:

In poverty of spirit man learns to accept himself as someone who does not belong to himself . . . . Man truly “possesses” this radical poverty only when he forgets himself and looks the other way. . . . Hence, it is in relation with our fellow [humans] that our own poverty of spirit is preserved, that our readiness for sacrifice that enable us to become truly [human].

Pope Francis speaks of the need for “ecological conversion. He writes, “In calling to mind the figure of Saint Francis, we come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall conversion . . .” He explains, “This conversion calls for a number of attitudes which together foster a spirit of generous care, full of tenderness.”
It is to the virtuous life of integral ecology that I will turn in the next session.

1 On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si’ (USCCB, 2015), no. 13, henceforth LS.

2 LS, no.16.

3 Chief among the biblical precedents for The Canticle are Ps. 104, Ps. 150 and The Song of the Three Young Men in Daniel [3:24 ff.).

4 LS, no.11.

5 Ibid.

6 Cunningham, Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life (Eerdmans, 2004), 98.


8 Boff, Francis, 68.

9 Ibid.


11 LS, no. 82.


13 Laborem exercens, no. 13; Sollicitudo rei socialis, nos. 11-26.

14 Centesimus annus, nos. 41-42.

15 LS, no.109. On the ambiguous role of technology in development also see Benedict XVI Caritas in Veritate, nos. 68-77.

16 LS, no. 108.

18 *LS*, no. 111.

19 Ibid.

20 *LS*, no. 114.

21 *LS*, no. 112.

22 Ibid.

23 *LS*, no. 215.

24 *LS*, no. 12.

25 *LS*, no. 233.

26 *LS*, no. 11.

27 Ibid.


29 Metz, 52.

30 *LS*, no. 67.

31 Boff, 67.

32 Boff, 68.

33 *LS*, no. 43.

34 *LS*, no. 139.

35 See *LS*, no. 112.

36 Metz, 33, 35-36.

37 *LS*, nos. 218 and 220.