The most surprising word we hear again and again from Pope Francis is “tenderness.” In some ways, it shows how close his relation is to Francis of Assisi, for tenderness and gentleness are virtues biographers and interpreters find in the Poor Man of Assisi. Leonardo Boff, for example, captures the spirit of his gentleness when he writes:

[T]o live humanly means to feel the warmth of someone who says to us, in spite of our physical and moral misery: “It is good that you exist, Brother. You are welcome. The sun is yours, the air is everybody’s and love can unite our hearts.”

Francis had traveled to southern France with his father and had absorbed the romantic culture of courtly love. When he wed Lady Poverty, he was evoking the romantic convention of a knight professing his love to an idealized lady beyond his station.
By all reports his joyfulness was a natural as well as a spiritual gift. His singing and his compositions drew his townspeople to him even before his conversion, but his songs were in the tradition of the troubadours, the wandering musicians of Languedoc. The courtliness of the knights and the romantic love celebrated by the troubadours colored his imagination, and they found renewed expression in his courtesy to the least of persons in his society, the lepers, and to the least of creatures like worms and bees.

**The Theology of Tenderness**

Francis’s first biographer, Thomas of Celano, observed, Francis had “the most gentle feeling of devotion to all things,” and “he felt as if transported by a heartfelt love for all creatures.”2 “Because of this,” writes Leonardo Boff, “he walked with reverence over rocks . . . ; he gathered the worms on the road so that they would not be stepped on by travelers; he provided the bees with honey and wine in the winder so that they would not perish from hunger and cold.”3 These are the extravagances of a saint whom his contemporaries sometimes called *pazzo*, “crazy.” They were, however, part of what
Lawrence Cunningham describes as his “performance” of the Gospel of God’s mercy. They were an enactments of the condescending love of the Most High God to all his creatures.

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis also sees tenderness as an essential attribute of God. “God’s infinite power,” he comments, “does not lead us to flee his fatherly tenderness, because in him affection and strength are joined.”

In the spirit of his patron, he writes, “Every creature is thus the object of the Father’s tenderness, who gives it its place in the world. Even the fleeting life of the least of beings is the object of his love, and in its few seconds of existence, God enolds it with his affection.”

The pope points as well to how Jesus preached that divine tenderness with his own appeals to the natural world. “With moving tenderness he would remind [his listeners], Pope Francis writes 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).
We are missing something profound if we dismiss the Holy Father’s call to tenderness as excessively sentimental. For that tenderness lies at the very heart of Jesus teaching about the revelation of God as Father. To Jesus the Father is not the Omnipotent Father-God, *Pantocrator*, of Hellenistic theologians and Byzantine emperors. He is *Abba*, a God who deals with us like a doting father.

Let us stop for a moment and consider the theology of tenderness. It should not be so strange to think of tenderness as a divine perfection. We think of God as filled with loving-kindness, as generous with his gifts, and welcoming in his forgiveness. Remember the parables of Luke 15 are not primarily about repentance but about God’s joyful outgoing love for sinners. Those parables also reflect the love and joy the outcasts of Jesus’ day found in his company.

Remember the context, “The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ Jesus is not only approachable, he welcomes the outcasts to dine
and drink with him. Jesus tells us in the Prodigal Son, “But while [the wayward son] was yet at a distance, the father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced and kissed him” (Lk. 15: 20). And that was just a start, before the robe, the ring, the calf and the partying. The story is a God who doesn’t stand on ceremony, and reaches out with lavish love to embrace wayward humanity.

The Father had “compassion.” The Hebrew and Greek words for compassion, as you know, are linked to the bowels, as in “the bowels of compassion,” and more particularly to the womb. And so, what the father is showing is parental tenderness, not patriarchal discipline. In Vultus misericordiae, the bull proclaiming the Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis wrote, “[T]he mercy of God is not an abstract idea, but a concrete reality with which he reveals his love as of that of a father or a mother, moved to the very depths out of love for their child.” He continues, “It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this is a ‘visceral’ love. It gushes forth from the depths naturally, full of tenderness and compassion, indulgence and mercy” (Italics, mine).

We ordinarily regard John’s gospel as a masterpiece of high theology, lacking the particularity of Mark and the gentle kindness,
mansuetudo, which ancient commentators found in Luke. But the images Jesus draws from nature and pastoral life in the Fourth Gospel also show a special intimacy with the natural world as vivid as any found in the Synoptics. Sheep know the voice of the shepherd, and so they follow him. At a time in the ancient world when people relied very much on their station in life to determine their relation with others, the shepherd calls the sheep by name (Jn. 10:1-9), a sure sign of intimacy.

The parable of the Vine and the Branches (Jn. 15:1-8) presents a complex image of mutual indwelling and pastoral care. The vine and the branches is a striking image of the “co-inherence,” that is, the mystic communion, of Jesus and his disciples which is at the heart of the teaching of the Last Supper Discourse. Even the figure of the Father as the vinedresser is not essentially harsh, but rather an image of “tough love” aimed at the increased fruitfulness of our lives, like that of a farmer who cares for his crops.

In seizing on the virtue of tenderness, then, Pope Francis is on solid scriptural ground. So, our own thinking about God ought to broadened and deepened to appreciate tenderness as an essential
divine attribute.

**Kenosis: the heart of Revelation**

The bull convoking the Jubilee of Mercy, *Vultus misericordiae*, calls Thomas Aquinas to witness on this issue:

“It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way”. [5] Saint Thomas Aquinas’ words show that God’s mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence. For this reason the liturgy, in one of its most ancient collects, has us pray: “O God, who reveal your power above all in your mercy and forgiveness ...” Throughout the history of humanity, God will always be the One who is present, close, provident, holy, and merciful. [6]

Similarly, in *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis reasons, “God’s infinite power does not lead us to flee his fatherly tenderness, because in him affection and strength are joined.” Though God is revealed in power, in storm, flood and earthquake, he revealed himself all the more in Christ Jesus “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be
grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2: 6-7). It is in Jesus’ *kenosis*, his self-emptying, that the divine nature is fully revealed to us.

In his *Saint Francis*, Leonardo Boff offers an almost scandalous thought, which is at the same time a profound insight into the essence of Christianity. He writes, “Transcendence alone does not reveal the total truth of the human being, because it only finds the light, the splendor of goodness, absolute positivity, God. To integrate our human experience of vulnerability, he argues, we require “trans-descendence, an experience we all fear and reject because we fear facing emptiness, solitude suffering and death.”

Choosing Christ means choosing *kenosis*, self-emptying. “In gentleness,” as he writes, the other “is perceived in itself; the person senses the other person as other and loves him or her; the person goes out and is fascinated by the other.”

A few years ago Vienna’s Cardinal Schonbrun addressed the Von Hildebrand Society on theology in art. He kept mostly to Byzantine iconography, the topic long ago of his doctoral
dissertation, and a point came when I realized he really did intend to say that the (Byzantine) icons alone were theophanous. So, at question time, I asked the cardinal to comment on the effect of the Franciscan movement, beginning with Giotto, on realism and individuality in western art and to personalism in social relations as a distinguishing feature of western civilization.

Cardinal Schonbrun acknowledged the influence of Francis on realism in art, but, to my surprise, denied that the more realistic art of the high Middle Ages was theophanous. God’s ultimate revelation, however, is Jesus himself who befriended the lowly and surrendered himself to his enemies and finally to death. Boff has put his finger on why the cardinal’s judgment on post-Byzantine art that night fell short. The Incarnation is not just God become man, with the emphasis on God. Thus, the Eastern Christian of the divinization of humanity, Theosis. But the Incarnation realizes that divinization in a very particular way. It is about God taking on “human weakness” in all its frailty and brokenness, right down to death. As the author the Letter to the Hebrews writes, “We have not a great high priest who is not able to sympathize with our
weaknesses, but one who is tested (pepeirasmenon) in every way as we are” (Hebrews 4:14). Boff’s claim is that we become authentic humans capable, of tenderness, only when we are able to identify, as Francis of Assisi did, with Christ lowly and crucified.

Though Pope Francis doesn’t cite it in Laudato Si’, the tenderness of Jesus is found in his invitation: “Come to me, all who are weary and overburdened . . . for I am meek and humble of heart and will give you rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28-29).

Resting on the interpretation of Saint Bonaventure, Boff argues that the Little Poor Man’s fraternity with all creation, even Brother Death, arose out of his deep belief in the fatherhood of God the Creator.9 Francis exhibits “a distinct way of being-in-the-world,” not [dominating] over things, but [being] together with them, like brothers and sisters in the same family.”10

It is worth noting that even though in Saint Thomas’s theology the universe of creatures is an ordered hierarchy, not a sororal-fraternal democracy as it was for Saint Francis, the common good of all creatures is God’s own self.11 According to the Dominican Thomas Gilby, the outstanding Thomist social philosopher-
theologian of the twentieth century, “[C]reatures look to God, not as servant to master, not as bailiff to lord, but as friend to friend.”

He goes on to depict the spiritual reality of the universe this way:

The shape and figure of the whole should not be pictured as a complicated system hemmed in on all sides, a tight though vast machine somehow swinging about on all sides, but a spiritual plenum, open . . . to God whose infinity to the philosopher is that of pure form, whose perfection to the theologian is that of pure truth held by vision and pure goodness enjoyed in friendship.

Thus, since the divine origin and divine vocation of all things is the God who is love, our human expression of charity ought to embrace not only our fellow humans, but also non-human creatures as well, who, like the sun and stars, are upheld and set in motion by God’s own love.

**Aspects of Christian Love**

Speaking of Scholastic argument, the late Methodist theologian James A. Nash, in his 1991 book *Loving Nature*, wrote, in my estimation, one of the very best theological treatments of ecology.
Nash’s arguments like those in the *Summa*, move back, in Scholastic style, from what seems to be the standard liberal theological convictions, by a series of subordinate questions, to a refined understanding of Christian responsibility, and indeed love, for nature, where the initial presumption proves mistaken.

Of the six dimensions of Christian love of nature Nash examines, four treat aspects of what Boff describes as the gentleness of Saint Francis. They are: (1) beneficence, (2) other-esteem, (3) receptivity and (4) humility.¹⁴

*Beneficence* means looking not only at “one’s own interests, but to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). “[B]y the principle of reasonable extension of love,” Nash writes, “this mandate for ministry applies to all God’s creatures in their natural habitats.”¹⁵ While beneficence includes the common minimum principle “Do no harm,” it goes beyond that, to require doing positive good for others, caring for the well-being of “humans and otherkind.”

To begin with, “Love as beneficence,” writes Nash, “may be simple acts of kindness to wild creatures, like letting a dead tree stand in the yard as a food source for insects and a nesting site for
woodpeckers . . .”16 It can also involve more complex activities like preventing pollution of water and air or working for preservation of species diversity. Beneficence as compassionate care, Nash argues, is indispensable to Christian ecological ethics, but it should never be a substitute for justice.

*Other-Esteem*, writes Nash, “‘does not insist on its own way’ (1Cor: 13:5). It appreciates and celebrates the existence of the other to the empathetic point that ‘if one member suffers, all suffer with it . . . (1Cor. 12:26).’” He cites H. Richard Niebuhr:

> Love is reverence. It keeps distance even as it draws near.
> It does not seek to absorb the other or want to be absorbed by it; it rejoices in the otherness of the other . . . it does not seek to refashion him . . . or make him a means to the self’s advancement.17

The love of esteem belongs to *agape* (Christian love), Nash contends, because it values the otherness or distinctiveness of the beloved “as good in itself, and treats the beloved accordingly.”

Esteem-love rejects anthropocentrism, the notion that the earth’s resources are solely for human ends. It recognizes that
nature has value in itself and humanity’s re-purposing of nature has limits, so that preservation of species, landscapes and bioregions, like Saint Francis’s instruction to leave a corner of the garden wild, is wholly in keeping with our human nature. Other-esteem, writes Nash, “recognizes the integrity of wild nature,”18 Such preservation has been encouraged by each of the past three popes.

Reading Pope Francis, however, you get the sense he is through and through an urban man. In *Laudato Si’* he writes repeatedly about preserving and restoring nature within cities to make them more hospitable to human life and preserving the links between the cities and their surrounding territory, so as to keep urban activity in balance with its natural support systems.19 If you are not an outdoor type, I recommend you survey *Laudao Si’* for Francis’s examples of felt environmental problems and his application of the ethics of care for the urban environment and especially poor urban dwellers. It will open your eyes to see the environmental question in new ways.

Saint John Paul II, by contrast, was an outdoorsman. A
mountaineer, canoeist and skier, he had a passion for the outdoors. He showed a greater appreciation for the wild than Francis does, and, while he showed a typically Catholic concern for human habitats as part of his theological environmental ethics, he also urged protection of notable landscapes and habitats.

*Receptivity*, writes Nash, “is an acute consciousness that human community is incomplete, weakened and even homicidal apart from others. . . . It is a yearning for relationship, not only to give but to receive from the treasured others.”20 In receptivity, we recognize our interdependence with the rest of God’s creation. Receptive love resists depletion and wholesale destruction of nature: the loss of the ozone layer, the indiscriminate use of pesticides, the destruction of tropical and temperate rain forests, the exhaustion of marine fisheries. So, receptivity leads us to resist environmental evils, and so, receptive love is at the root of the quest for environmental justice, for the creation of a sustainable economy and for preservation movements of every sort.

Receptivity, in Nash’s view, is also at the root of the spiritual renewal we find in nature. I confess myself to being a biophile. I
grow anxious without some real involvement in the outdoors. I relax when I come to CUA, because the campus is so open compared to the built-up environment at Georgetown. And, at Georgetown, I get to the Potomac River and the C&O Canal as often as I can.

Nash identifies a particular form of receptive love he calls “descendentalism,” an earthy spiritual practice akin to Boff’s “trans-descendence.” Its exemplar is the naturalist John Muir, who rode the top of a great fir tree in a storm and discovered the glaciation of Yosemite by feeling his way along the valley walls as he imagined a river of ice might until he found the great Lyell Glacier. In his way, Muir was the Saint Francis of early American environmentalism.

The American cult of wilderness owes a great deal to Muir and the other naturalists of western America. I openly admit to being in their debt. For twenty years I made backpacking retreats. They were times of enveloping prayer and probing reflection. Like the psalmist, I experienced there the forest alive with praise for the Creator and the joyous harmony of all creation in God. In a powerful way, I found God’s blessing in a field of wildflowers.

There were also times when to my great surprise I became
familiar with foxes, bears and mountain lions. In the silence and quasi-solitude of a wilderness retreat we became, like legendary hermit saints, part of the environment with the animals. We were not threats to them, and they were not threats to us. We were able to live with some familiarity in their midst. We lived the “Peaceable Kingdom” envisaged by Isaiah, because the receptivity we lived in prayer became our attitude to the land and its creatures too.

The last dimension of love of nature that relates to gentleness is humility. True to his Thomistic sensibilities, Nash does not take Francis with his profound gestures of humility as his model. Rather, for Nash, humility consists in thinking neither too much nor too little of oneself, rather like the Greek ideal of sophosyne and the Thomistic virtue of temperance.

Nevertheless, while initially shunning exaggerated gestures of humility, Nash writes:

Humility sits with the lowliest human as an equal (Jas. 2:1-9), and even with unequals in an environmental context, in the manner of the self-emptying God . . . . It regards all God’s creatures as worthy of moral
Humble love is modest, restrained and cautious. Like Francis or even Muir, it favors simplicity of life. It willingly accepts reductions in lifestyle, as Saint John Paul and Pope Francis have urged, for the sake of the world’s poor and for the planetary common good. It also rejects the high risks imposed by the large-scale manipulation of nature.

The humble love of nature accepts the precautionary principle, as does Pope Francis in *Laudato Si’, no. 186*, the widely accepted principle, that “where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a pretext for postponing cost-effective measures’ which prevent environmental degradation. This precautionary principle,” Pope Francis writes, “makes it possible to protect those who are most vulnerable and whose ability to defend their interests and to assemble incontrovertible evidence is limited.” Humility allows us not only to admit to our human fallibility and repent of our errors, but also to acknowledge and act in the knowledge of the collective concupiscence that lies at the root of so much ecological
insensitivity, denial and destruction.

**The Tenderness of Saint Joseph**

*Laudato Si’* invokes the memory of Saint Joseph as a model of responsible care for the environment. “The Gospel presents Joseph as a just man, hard-working and strong. But,” writes Pope Francis, “he also shows great tenderness, which is not a mark of the weak but of those who are genuinely strong, fully aware of reality and ready to love and serve in humility.”

In his inaugural homily on the Feast of Saint Joseph, 2013, Papa Bergoglio spoke at length about the tenderness of St. Joseph. “Joseph is a ‘protector,’” he told the crowd assembled in Saint Peter’s Square, “because he is able to hear God’s voice and be guided by his will; and for this reason he is all the more sensitive to the persons entrusted to his safekeeping. He can look at things realistically, he is in touch with his surroundings; he can make truly wise decisions.”

Saint Joseph takes the Holy Family as a trust from Father with the attentiveness and receptivity that enabled him to heed God’s will, transmitted to him in dreams. He shows the same kind
of attentiveness to Mary and Jesus and the situations in which they find themselves. “He is in touch with his surroundings,” Pope Francis said. He is able to deal with threats and novel circumstances, because he doesn’t try to make God’s plan fit his own notions of what is right. He is free to accept God’s will, because he is not anxiously imposing his own will on others. For the same reason, he acts with tenderness.

Saint Joseph’s reverence is truly religious in the sense Clifford Geertz defined religion. It is not limited to certain times and occasions. It “pervades” his personality and “perdures” across life’s changes, so that the reverence Joseph experiences before God impinges on all his dealings, not only with the Holy Family, but with all humanity and even the smallest creature. It is tenderness, because it doesn’t just inhibit his engagement with others and the exercise of his responsibilities in their regard, but rather also affects his every move with them. Tenderness is another word for reverence in action. Tenderness, however, is reverence in the flesh, in direct human contact.

The First Servant Song (Is. 42:1-4) describes God’s
instrument:

A bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.
He will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not fail. (v. 3)

God’s work is done through the tender-hearted. If we are to do God’s work protecting the poor and defending creation, then we must be like Jesus “meek and humble of heart” (Matt. 11:28).

Pope Francis’s Church is not a church of the sacristy, but of the streets and the alleys. He invites us to active love in the world. Yet in its action Christian love must be gentle and humble like the love of Christ itself.

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2 Cited in Boff, 34-35.
3 Boff, 35.
4 *LS*, no. 73.
5 *LS*, no. 77.
6 See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html, no. 6
7 Ibid.
8 Boff, 14.
9 Boff, 36-37, 40.
10 Boff, 35.
On the cosmic democracy, see Boff, 34-47 (“Confraternization with Nature: The Cosmic Democracy”).


Gilby, 128.

The others are understanding and communion. The last I will treat in the third talk of this series.


Ibid.


Nash, 154.

See *LS*, 141, 150, 154, and 232 on urban concerns; and 151 on the rural-urban interface. But, the condition of the rural poor is also a concern, see, e.g., nos. 94, 152, 154 and 180.

Nash, 155.

Nash, 156.

*LS*, no 186. Citation comes from the 1992 Rio Declaration.

*LS*, 242,