

Human Ecology: Fraternity and Communion

Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson

Cardinal Turkson speaks at the Teams of Our Lady conference in Fatima

“The human person is created for a life of communion”, and as such, “is created to coexist in the relationship of a family, community, society, as equals in dignity and to pursue their common good”. And the entire human family “is responsible for [the care of our] planetary home and indeed, all creation”. Speaking on Wednesday, 18 July [2018] to thousands of couples gathered at the “Teams of Our Lady” Conference in Fatima, Portugal, Cardinal Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson offered a reflection on “human ecology” based on “fraternity” and “communion”. The following is an abridged version of the English text of the address delivered by the Prefect of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development.

Shortly after His All Holiness, Patriarch Barthomew of Constantinople had described the abusive treatment of creation in terms of *sin*, Pope Francis wrote his Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si’ (LS) on the Care of Our Common Home* to address the current ecological crisis, both natural human. Not only is our environment deteriorating globally, little effort is also made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic human ecology (LS, 5). “The destruction of the human environment”, he observed, “is extremely serious, not only because God has entrusted the world to us men and women, but because human life is itself a gift which must be defended from various forms of debasement” (LS, 5). That is why celebrating the feast of St Joseph, the custodian of the Holy Family at the inaugural Mass of his Pontificate, Pope Francis invited the faithful gathered in Saint Peter’s Square and the whole world to listen to the cry of two *fragilities* in our midst: creation and the poor. Rendered fragile by the misdeeds of man, the Pope exhorted the human family to listen to the cry of these *fragilities* not only with the mind, but with the heart most importantly. Man cannot be indifferent to the lot of these *fragilities*; for, “every effort to protect and improve our world entails profound changes in lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies” (LS, 5). The human person and his culture is so central to the ecological crisis. So, how may we evaluate the place of the human person in the ecological crisis?

The outburst of ecological consciousness and interest that characterized the 70’s found expression variously in the organization of summits on the level of the United Nations, in studies in academic institutions and universities, and in the creation of popular *green movements*. Universities began to dedicate Chairs, Colleges and Departments to environmental studies, dealing with it purely so, as *Department of Environmental Studies*. But the academic interest in the environment also took the form of a study of the relationship between the environment and the human presence within it. This gave rise to the creation in universities of *Departments of Human Ecology* for the study of the impact of the human person on his environment, or the human person in his environment as an instance of evolutionary adaptation to the environment. Sometimes, it also gave rise to interdisciplinary studies, involving very many of the social sciences.

Governments too began to respond to concerns about the environment through the creation of *Environmental Protection (or conservation) Agencies*; and, beginning with its *Conference on the Human Environment* in Stockholm (1972), the United Nations has consistently dedicated attention to the *environmental question* in subsequent conferences. Since its meeting in Johannesburg (2002), the United Nations also consistently relates the “question of the environment” with the question of “human development”; and the current UN SDGs are, according to the (former) Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon, not only a narrative about development and the protection of the environment (SDC 6, 13, 14, 15); they are also a *human dignity narrative that leaves no one behind*.

The UN Secretary General’s formulation of the relationship between the protection of the environment and human dignity (or development) affirms not only the physical interrelatedness of humanity with its physical environment (nature); it also affirms the interdependence of their destinies, their lot and their wellbeing. But the descriptions of the nature of the inter-relatedness and interdependence of man on his environment has not enjoyed unanimity and agreement, in the various efforts to describe it.

Some centers of Higher Education, influenced by an evolutionary sense of development, have described the relations between the human person and his environment as the “*survival of the fittest*”. Others describe the relationship between the human person and his environment in terms of a *human ecology*, which studies the human dimensions of ecological/environmental problems. Normally, this takes the form of an interdisciplinary pursuit, that studies how the human person and his environment mutually affect each other. But, there are also studies that present the presence of the human species as a (potential) menace to the environment. Related to this position is the presentation of the *limits of the earth’s resources*, as an issue of human Ecology.

So, what is man/woman, and what is their place in and their relationship with creation and their created environment?

The first strikes and strokes of the Church’s understanding about the place of man in creation derive from the biblical account of creation in the Book of Genesis (1-3). There, in the first account of creation (Gen 1-2:4a), created nature, the environment of human existence, is presented as the work of God’s Word and *by design*. The first instance of God speaking his Word, was actually at the creation of the world; and it was the creation of the world as *home* for humanity. The series of “*God said*” did “tear through the silence of nothingness” to produce created reality. God’s word (“and God said: let there be...”) transformed “chaos” at the dawn of creation into a “cosmos”, an ordered world system, capable of supporting human life, and suitable to be home for man.

Then, God created man, male and female, in his image and likeness, and *to have dominion over* everything that God has created. Just as man is distinct from the rest of creation by reason of his creation in the *image and likeness of God*, so is he also distinct in his relationship to the rest of creation by his exercise of *dominion* over it; and the exact sense of this exercise of *dominion over creation* is still the subject of vivid exegetical, theological, economic and social discussions.

In the second account of creation, however, this created and cosmic home, *suitable for man*, was described as a “*garden planted by God*” (Gen 2:8, 15). Here God placed man, formed out of the dust of the earth and the breath of God. In this second account of creation, man is more clearly related to *created nature* by reason of his sharing in its substance (*dust*), but distinct also from it by reason of his bearing within himself the breath of God. But, when man is introduced into the *garden planted by God*, he was to *till and keep it*. Thus dominion over creation in the first account of creation is replaced in the second account by *tilling and keeping the garden*. Though functionally presented, man’s relationship with his *garden-home* in the second account is clearer to decipher.

The earth was barren and unproductive, because there was no man to till it, according to the second account; and the *formation of man from the dust of the earth* to be breathed into by God to become a *living soul*, was to have someone to till the earth-garden and to make it productive. But man was also to *keep* the earth-garden which was his home; and how may one understand this *keeping* function and role of man?

Already, man’s task of *tilling* the earth-garden was expressed in the Hebrew to describe not only the work man in the garden-home, but also the worship or service man (Israel) renders to God in the temple. Man’s work in the garden-home appears to participate in the reverential act of worship that man renders to God, the creator!

Next, man’s duty of *keeping* the garden-home is expressed by the Hebrew *šmr* which was also the verb which was used by Cain to describe his duty towards his brother Abel. There Cain asked: “*Am I my brother’s keeper (šmr)*”; and a brother should at least care for the safety, protection and wellbeing of his brother. The use of the same verb (*šmr*) to express the charge God gave to man about his garden-home means that man’s relationship to his garden-home, which he/she had to till, was to be guided by *great solicitude for the wellbeing of the garden-home, as if for a brother*. Now, this account of creation was written thousands of years before St Francis of Assisi; but his way of seeing himself as standing in *kinship ties* with the elements of creation is the imagery that the account of creation evokes.

Thus, man is not the *auto-referential centre* of creation. In the distinctiveness of his/her creation in the *image and likeness of God*, and *bearing in himself the breath of God*, man is more a part of an interconnected and interdependent created world!

But not only is man a part of an interconnected and an interdependent creation; man is also a part of a community: he/she is in communion with others of his/her kind and lives in a network of relationships, fashioned by the *created gift of procreation*. For, when in Genesis 2, Adam had given names to all created living beings and found none to be of his kind, God fashioned the woman out of him to be his kind. When later, Adam “*knew*” his wife, they engendered a son, propagating their kind. In Cain, their son, the creation of the human person in the image and likeness of God, is passed on. And when, again, Adam knew his wife, they engendered another son (Abel), a *brother* of Cain. Thus, the biblical account of the origins of the world and the human family presents *birth* as the source of the multiplication of the human species. But born from the *same womb*, brothers/sisters (*adelphoi/adelphai*) share the same transmitted nature of having been *created in the image and likeness of God*. Brothers (sisters), therefore, are *equal in dignity*, — and every killing or murder of a human being is a *fratricide*. The human being is, therefore, not an individual. He/she is a *person, a relational being*. He/she is created to *coexist in the relationship of a family, community, society*, as equals in dignity and to pursue their *common good*. The human person is created for a life of *communion*!

Furthermore, in the New Testament, the prologue of the Gospel of John (Jn 1) recalls the first account of creation by the Word of God in the Book of Genesis, and identifies the Word of God with Jesus Christ. Thus the Evangelist John writes: “*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being*” (Jn 1:3; cf. Is. 45:12. ff; Job 38:4; Neh. 9:6 etc.). What has come into being through the Word of God was “*life*”; and *creation* is born of the Word of God which overcomes *nothingness* and creates *life*.

Besides, *creation* in the Prologue of the Gospel of John is not a passing encounter of God’s Word with the world. John calls the Word of God, “*Logos*”. As the Word of creation, God’s *Logos* reaches down to man and creation to initiate a *dialogue*: a *dialogos*. Man and creation are forever engaged in *dialogue* with God; and man is a *dialogue partner* before God.

This sustained encounter of God’s Word with man and his/her world which *creation* denotes finds its fullest expression in the *incarnation of Jesus Christ*. In assuming human flesh, Jesus Christ has come to share in creation, definitively and eternally binding God to it. Furthermore, in his work of redemption, Jesus Christ has redeemed creation from the effects of sin, making it capable of fulfilling its original purpose and destiny, of being truly a home for the human family and a place where God dwells among men, as a sign of and in anticipation (*prefiguration*) of the *Kingdom of God*. In Jesus Christ, as St Paul testifies, “*Grace has abounded all the more, where sin once increased*” (cf. Rom. 5:20). Thus, the world, as God’s creation, is not only designed to be the *home of man*. It is also an instance of *created and redeemed goodness*, that witnesses to the Creator’s goodness; for everything God created was “*good*”, indeed, “*very good*” (Gen. 1).

Thus *human ecology* is not just the interplay or interaction of man with his/her environment. It is rather the *created conditions of goodness, order, justice, love, brotherhood, solidarity and piety, which make human life flourish as God’s creation*. It is the unification of humanity with the Christian ideal of a single human family of peoples in solidarity and fraternity.

Let us unpack this further: *Ecology* starts with three letters “eco” from the Greek *oikos*, which means “home or household”; and then adds *logos*, which is “discourse, meaning, sense”. So ecology is meaningful talk about our home; and its usual application is to our home the earth. Being “a wondrous work of the Creator,” the natural environment contains “a ‘*grammar*’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation” (Benedict XVI, Civ 48).

Accordingly, the notion of “ecology” enjoins responsibility. We understand the natural world as our home because we understand what it means to have a home for our family. So we also understand that our family is responsible for the family home — so the human family is responsible for the planetary home and, indeed, all creation.

Economy starts with *oikos* again and adds *nomos*, “rule” or “law”. What are the rules that make our family’s home or household viable and genuinely human? By extension, it is about rules and laws that make all of humanity’s home work properly?

The two words beginning with *oikos* imply how we should dwell and behave here on our planet — we are members of one household, which is common to all; and the whole idea and experience of *economy* requires justice.

The ethical or moral import of ecology and economy for the family is undeniable. We recognize that, in our days, the family can easily suffer a two-fold vulnerability from the viewpoint of the economy (insufficient salary, joblessness, insecurity, trafficking and slavery — briefly, the lack of decent work) and from the viewpoint of ecology (insufficient access to water, hunger and malnutrition, precarious housing, wasted lands or fisheries — briefly, environmental degradation and the throw-away culture).

On the other hand, the family is at the origins of the most basic positive or constructive attitudes and habits. The experience of parental love nourishes appreciation for Divine Providence. A good family life is suffused with gratitude. Families can learn not to waste and, on the contrary, to share in a spirit of gratuity, generosity. Families can also learn to live in greater austerity both out of choice and out of necessity. Many families already know these things.

Finally and very importantly, it is first in the family that we learn to share and to face challenges straight-on, together, with courage and with creativity. Good families do not allow themselves to decline into victimhood; instead, they rally their gifts, talents and resources and — often joining with others, with relatives or neighbours or friends — confront whatever threatens or undermines their human dignity and their integral development. And this “whatever” includes various forms of environmental degradation.

If all of these are attributes of the human person and its life in communion in a family, then the conditions which make these attributes possible constitute *human ecology*: the environment that favours and promotes these. It is a real *human dignity* programme, a *morality programme*, and the *Magisterium* of the Church has not failed in her own ways: in the Writings and Addresses of Popes, to teach it.

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