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A Better Deal: Sustainable Trading

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For the majority of my life I'd never knowingly met a climate change skeptic. I generally move in the kind of circles where it's taken for granted that we would care about the environment and want to do our bit to minimize our negative impact on the world around us. In my world, buying fairly traded and organic products isn't necessarily something we can afford to do all the time, but it's definitely something we'd like to do all the time. We recycle, try to turn the lights off when we're not using them, unplug our chargers from the wall when we're finished with them, and try not to waste water.

I grew up in England, where we were taught about climate change and other environmental issues from an early age. I recently rediscovered an old journal from when I was around 7 or 8 years old, with a note that said: "If I was the government, I would ban all the cars and everyone would use horses and carriages so that there wasn't any pollution and horrible noise." (Well, at least that was the general thrust of it—the spelling was a little iffy.)

For me, there has never been a tension between my Catholic faith and my interest in sustainability and [ethical consumerism](#); in fact, they're such a natural fit that I would say my Catholic faith enriches and informs my desire to buy fairly traded and eco-friendly products, to live a life that has as low an impact on the environment as possible. It was only relatively recently that I realized just how normal it is for some Catholics, especially Americans, to be suspicious of talk of "conscious consumerism" and "being green".

In 2013 I gave a talk at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro at an event organized by the Catholic environmental organization, Creatio, on behalf of my late father, Stratford Caldecott, who couldn't travel due to his advanced cancer. Our goal was to show the young Catholics at the event that environmental sustainability is—or should be—a huge part of Catholic life. We wanted to reclaim the conversation from secularists who are obsessed with population control and think that the world would be better off if humans didn't exist.

The extreme secular attitude to climate change and ecology could be represented by this short and snappy quote from the environmental organization Greenpeace: "The earth is 4.6 billion

years old. Scaling to 46 years, humans have been here for 4 hours, the industrial revolution began 1 minute ago, and in that time, we've destroyed more than half the world's forests." [i] Humans, in other words, are the enemy of the earth. As a very visibly pregnant 25-year-old, I was a physical embodiment of the difference between Catholic and secular attitudes towards the environment, a sign it is possible to believe humans have a duty and responsibility to care for the physical world around us while at the same time believing that humans are part of the solution as well as the problem. God looked at all of his creation, humans included, and declared us to be good.

Pope Francis has caused a stir with his radical attitude towards the environment and social ethics. At his inaugural Mass, he asked us to become "protectors of creation, protectors of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another and of the environment." As his papacy has progressed he has reminded over and over again that, as he put it via his Twitter account in 2013, "Care of creation is not just something God spoke of at the dawn of history: he entrusts it to each of us as part of his plan."

Though the media often presents Francis as the first pope to take such an interest in environmental issues and social justice, he is in fact in continuity with the legacy of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. As my father wrote in our talk for Rio in 2013, Pope John Paul II's teaching on The Theology of the Body has a lot more to do with ecology and social ethics than most people realize: "The Church's teaching on the environment and on the human body, on cherishing the natural world and cherishing our human nature, belong together. They cannot be separated."

If we see our bodies in the context of The Theology of the Body, as physical realities that mirror the divine nature, doesn't this mean that the material, physical world around us (though fallen) also reflects God's nature? While sex is good and concupiscence is the sin that distorts this good, isn't respect for the material realm essentially good, yet greed, consumerism, and a lust for possessions a distortion of this good? The Albigenian heretics despised their bodies, all sexual desire and physical things as being "of the world" and therefore essentially evil. This kind of thinking has arisen again and again throughout the history of the Church, and we have to see it for what it is: a heresy.

Consumerism isn't really a love of the objective material world: that is to say the world God created and entrusted to us. Consumerism is the illusion that we own that world and that we can help ourselves to any aspect of it, in any way we see fit. That we can describe it and market it to ourselves, knowing what's good and what's evil, without reference to the bigger picture. Even our charity can become tainted with this kind of consumerism. There's a hypocrisy in saying that you care for the poor, the downtrodden of society, and then not thinking about where your clothing has come from, who made it.

Catholic social teaching—with which *Laudato si'* is in strong continuity—contains resources which could bring about a deep transformation of this situation. Distributism, localism, subsidiarity—all these are eco-friendly contributions that we can make to the debate. Slow living, seasonal eating, celebrating and respecting craftsmanship: all of these are or should be part of the Catholic ethos. Renewed interest in the Guilds—that Medieval form of social organisation—draws on Catholic cultural resources. It's only since the industrial revolution that the manual worker and laborer has become disdained, considered the lowest of society, cogs in a machine rather than the skilled crafts people who were respected for their unique talents and viewed as an essential part of society.

We have a heavier responsibility than any other species to protect and cooperate with the

world around us. In fact, Genesis tells us that this is what we were created for: “God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” That vocation to cultivate and look after the earth continues after our exile from the Garden of Eden: that is, after we began to sin. All that changed was that the job became more difficult. God told Adam: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field” (Gen 3:17–18).

As my father wrote, “we need a humanistic ecological vision that takes account of the special nature of human beings, as well as the ecosystem in which we belong.” This vision, as Pope Benedict said, should take in “not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations”. That is, our “duties towards the human person”.^[ii] For all these things are part of what we mean by the nature of human beings. We are social by nature. We are born into families. We find meaning in our lives through loving and serving others. We have a dignity that can be expressed in the form of rights and duties.

Pope Benedict taught that Christianity tries to balance the value of the human person with the value of nature as God’s creation. The Book of Genesis—as well as the Psalms and many other parts of the Bible, which praise the glories of nature—teach Christians to be responsible and gentle and wise in the way we behave towards the world around us. The virtue of Prudence instructs us to take special care to preserve the natural resources on which our lives and those of our children depend. The other three “cardinal virtues” that are part of the Christian life are just as relevant. Temperance tells us that we must not become greedy, addicted to consumption, living a lifestyle that depends on having more and more. The virtue of Justice reminds us that many of us in the richer countries of the world support our lifestyle at the expense of the poorer countries. And we need the virtue of Fortitude or Courage to strengthen us for what we have to do: to find ways to change the way we live, to be kinder to the earth, fairer to our fellow human beings, and merciful towards the animals and plants that God has created out of his love and wisdom.

Pope Francis condemned our culture’s unrestrained greed in a speech that he made on the UN World Environment Day in 2013, saying: “Man is not in charge today, money is in charge, money rules. God our Father did not give the task of caring for the earth to money, but to us, to men and women: we have this task! Instead, men and women are sacrificed to the idols of profit and consumption: it is the ‘culture of waste.’”^[iii] It is our duty as Christians to find ways out of this culture of waste that we have created. And it is Christian virtues which power this search: in the first place, a love of truth. So let’s look at some hard facts.

In 1960, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency, the United States produced approximately 88 million tons of municipal waste. By 2010 that number had risen to just under 250 million tons. This jump reflects an almost 184 percent increase in what Americans throw out, even though the population increased by only 60 percent. Everything we buy these days is produced to be cheap and not to last, wrapped in layers of plastic packaging that more often than not ends up in landfill sites.

As a culture we seek quick fixes and easy options, but these quick fixes are costing the planet—and subsequently future generations—a lot. The production of clothes, for example, has a major impact upon human lives as well as the environment, for the most part not seen or considered by the average shopper. Once again, we see that the environmental and human elements cannot be separated. The World Health Organization believes that around 20,000 farmers in developing countries die a year as a result of agricultural pesticides used in cotton farming.

And here's another hard fact. Respect for the human person, including the human body, cannot be divorced from respect for nature or social justice. In his speech to the German Bundestag in September 2011 called "The Listening Heart", Pope Benedict reminded us of this. "We must listen to the language of nature and we must answer accordingly. Yet I would like to underline a point that seems to me to be neglected, today as in the past: there is also an ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself."[iv]

Saint John Paul's Theology of the Body is all about what we find when we understand our own nature as created by God. We need to pay attention to the "spousal" or "nuptial" meaning of the body, the fact that we were made for love, and that there is a "way of living the body" in its authentic masculinity and femininity. This nuptial meaning has been limited, violated and deformed over time and by modern culture, until we have almost lost the power of seeing it, but it is still there to be discovered with the help of grace, like a spark deep within the human heart. The "language of the body" is part of that "language of nature" that Pope Benedict speaks of. The way we live, the clothes we buy and wear, the work we do, the way we treat each other, and, yes, the way we treat animals and the whole of nature, should reflect our understanding of that language: the fact that we are put here not to destroy and exploit but to love and cooperate.

In our families we must draw on the love that opens our eyes to reality, as Pope Francis says in his encyclical *Lumen Fidei*: "Faith knows because it is tied to love, because love itself brings enlightenment. Faith's understanding is born when we receive the immense love of God which transforms us inwardly and enables us to see reality with new eyes"[v]. In turn, by revealing the love of God the Creator, faith "enables us to respect nature all the more, and to discern in it a grammar written by the hand of God and a dwelling place entrusted to our protection and care. Faith also helps us to devise models of development which are based not simply on utility and profit, but consider creation as a gift for which we are all indebted"[vi].

All of this drove me to create a website called *A Better Place Journal*. In the first place, I wanted to make conscious consumerism easier and more accessible to the average person. Even the simplest consumer choices we make every day matter, and have the potential to impact other people's lives. Everything is connected. We need to train ourselves to live up to our calling to be better stewards of creation. But the motivation to do this, for those who are not convinced by religious arguments, is founded in a greater appreciation of beauty and durability, and right relations between people: those who produce, and those who trade with them. Starting with the material realm, with the fact that people need to clothe themselves and care for their homes, I believe we can communicate a vision that all can appreciate. A vision that says, we may not be able to save the world, but we can at least make it a better place.

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[i]

<http://greenpeaceusa.tumblr.com/post/93508666790/the-earth-is-46-billion-years-old-scaling-to-46>.

[ii] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 51.

[iii] <http://en.radiovaticana.va/storico/2013/06/05/pope...>

[iv] <https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/spee...>

[v] *Lumen Fidei*, 26.

[vi] *Ibid.*, 55.

