

Pope Francis, Theology of the Body, Ecology, and Encounter

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IN *LAUDATO SI'*, Pope Francis affirms, "There can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology" (no. 118). And, indeed, throughout the encyclical, he roots his ecological vision in his understanding of the human person. His account pays particular attention to the person's bodily dimension. This connection between the theology of the human person and ecology stands out as crucial, especially because it is frequently overlooked or even intentionally ignored, perhaps out of fear that an emphasis on the person leads to a destructive mentality that legitimatizes dominating nature. These fears certainly have merit: the focus on the central role of the human person in Christianity has often led to the neglect and abuse of the natural world.¹ Pope Francis's vision of the human person's relationship to the environment, however, differs radically from this perversion of the Christian account. It accentuates care for the earth without degrading the centrality of the person. Building from this foundation, this essay links Francis's ecological vision with John Paul II's anthropology (particularly as it appears in his "theology of the body"), uses the connection to highlight the importance of encounter in ecology, and proposes a few roles that the local church should play in ecological renewal.

FRANCIS AND JOHN PAUL II ON THE 'THEOLOGY OF THE BODY'

For John Paul II's "theology of the body," the body reveals the truth of the person. We must "allow the body itself, as it were, to speak.... It speaks with its masculinity or femininity, it speaks with the mysterious language of the personal gift, it speaks in the language of faithfulness, that is, of love, and in the language of conjugal unfaithfulness, that is, of 'adultery.'"² This logic of gift lies at the heart of

¹ This criticism appears perhaps most famously in Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-1207.

² John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Massachusetts: Pauline Book & Media, 2006), 536.

what it means to be an embodied person.³ The body has a spousal or nuptial meaning, that is, it has the “power to express love.”⁴ This nuptial meaning of the body particularly manifests itself in sexual intercourse, which by its nature communicates the total gift of one person to another. In this way, the body serves as the physical expression of the complete self-giving of marriage. On this account, the mutual and total self-gift brings about a real communion of persons.⁵

John Paul II proposes the fundamental nature of self-gift and its role in forming interpersonal communion in order to replace the categories of use and consumption.⁶ Michael Waldstein’s introduction to *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* explains John Paul II’s underlying concerns. Waldstein utilizes the work of Kenneth Schmitz and argues that John Paul II’s main objective consists in overcoming a certain modernist account of subjectivity paired with a mechanistic account of nature.⁷ According to Waldstein, “In Wojtyla’s sexual ethics, one can see the importance of the concern for nature.... The restricted mechanist image of nature produced by natural science, and particularly biology, obscures our vision for the order of living nature in all its richness and therefore prevents us from understanding and living sex in its full meaning.”⁸ On this account, the appreciation of the body has been distorted such that it is regarded not as a divine gift, but rather as an object of exploitation and scientific mastery. The defense of the body proves crucial in overcoming a dualistic account that sees all material things as nothing more than objects of power.⁹ In contrast to this power-driven view of matter, John

³ Michael Waldstein summarizes, “Gift expresses the essential truth of the human body,” and asserts that this point constitutes the basic line of argument found throughout the theology of the body. See Waldstein, “Introduction,” in John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 124.

⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 185-86. For a positive assessment of some aspects of this approach, see David Cloutier and William Mattison, III, “Bodies Poured Out in Christ: Marriage Beyond the Theology of the Body,” in *Leaving and Coming Home: New Wineskins for Catholic Sexual Ethics*, ed. David Cloutier (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 208-214.

⁵ Jennifer Bader explains how self-gift leads to communion. See Jennifer Bader, “Engaging the Struggle: John Paul II on Personhood and Sexuality,” in *Human Sexuality in the Catholic Tradition*, eds. Kieran Scott and Harold Daly Horell (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 93-94.

⁶ See Waldstein, “Introduction,” 2.

⁷ See Kenneth Schmitz, *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 131-37, and Waldstein, “Introduction,” 34-63, esp. 34-44.

⁸ Waldstein, “Introduction,” 97.

⁹ “John Paul II’s main concern in TOB is to help overcome the body-spirit dualism that emerged from placing nature in the position of an ‘object’ for human power” (Waldstein, “Introduction,” 44). Earlier Waldstein commented, “The full greatness of John Paul II’s vision only emerges when one sees his concern for spousal love in

Paul II asserts that the hermeneutics of gift “stands at the very heart of the mystery of creation”; creation signifies a “gift; a fundamental and ‘radical’ gift, that is, an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing.”¹⁰

Waldstein’s explanation, in bringing out the underlying concerns of John Paul II’s work, elucidates a common framework for Francis’s ecology and John Paul II’s anthropology. Francis also starts with the meaning of the body and similarly wants to replace the categories of use and exploitation with that of gift. He primarily expounds the meaning of the body, however, to explain the human person’s responsibility toward the environment. “It is enough,” he writes, “to recognize that our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings. The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 155).¹¹ Francis thus also draws on the logic of gift, which is revealed by the language of the body and shows the human person and the whole created world as a gift given. In this sense, the environment highlights the “logic of receptivity” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 159). This logic of receptivity expands beyond the marital communion of persons to the entire created world and illustrates that we are not the creators of our own meaning.¹²

Reading Francis together with John Paul II, however, seems problematic on one level. For John Paul II, a real communion is only possible between human persons. He highlights that in original solitude, the person is distinguished from all other living beings and opens toward the other with whom is shared a human nature.¹³ “None of these [other] beings, in fact, offers man the basic conditions that *make it*

the larger context of his concern about our age, above all for the question of scientific knowledge and power over nature, that is the characteristically modern question of ‘progress.’” Waldstein, “Introduction,” 3. See also p. 95-107.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 179-180.

¹¹ The connection between sexuality and ecology is also evident in the thought of Wendell Berry. See *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (California: Counterpoint, 1997), especially “Chapter 7: The Body and the Earth,” 101-146. In the words of Berry, “It is hardly surprising, then, that there should be some profound resemblances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the earth” (101). Later, he comments similarly, “Between our relation to our sexuality and our relation to the reproductivity of the earth, for instance, the resemblance is plain and strong and apparently inescapable” (128).

¹² See Rowan Williams, “Embracing Our Limits: The Lessons of *Laudato si’*,” *Commonweal*, September 23, 2015, www.commonwealmagazine.org/embracing-our-limits. For the importance of receptivity in the marital communion of persons, see Robert Ryan, “More than Self Gift and Sex: The Role of Receptivity in Catholic Marital Ethics,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 4, no. 1 (June 2015): 141-66.

¹³ See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 162-163.

possible to exist in a relation of reciprocal gift.”¹⁴ Only a human person can receive the self-gift of the other and respond with his or her own self-gift. In John Paul II’s words, “These two functions of the mutual exchange are deeply connected in the whole process of the ‘gift of self’: giving and accepting the gift interpenetrate in such a way that the very act of giving becomes acceptance, and acceptance transforms the giving.”¹⁵ Here, the connection between Francis and John Paul II seems to break down; the sense of communion between persons that John Paul II has in mind is seemingly impossible with natural things because humanity differs radically from the rest of creation.

And yet Pope Francis does not hesitate to use the language of communion even with creation. While not a communion of persons, this relationship does constitute a real communion for Francis. According to *Laudato Si’*, the gift of creation is “a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion” (no. 76).¹⁶ Moreover, the encyclical is clear that human life “is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbor, and with the earth itself” (no. 66).¹⁷ Like a communion of persons, the communion with the earth requires a generous gift of self. On this point, Francis cites Patriarch Bartholomew who challenges us to replace consumption with sacrifice and demands that we embrace an asceticism which “entails learning to give, and not simply to give up. It is a way of loving, a moving gradually away from what I want to what God’s world needs” (no. 9). Later in the text, Pope Francis speaks about the service of caring for public spaces, such as cleaning a landscape or an abandoned monument, and says, “These community actions, when they express self-giving love, can also become intense spiritual experiences” (no. 232).¹⁸ These texts point to the fact that proper care for the environment requires the expression of love through an embodied gift of self in a way similar to the manner in which John Paul II asserts that an embodied self-gift is required for a communion of persons.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 181. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 196.

¹⁶ See also *Laudato Si’*, nos. 89-92.

¹⁷ Francis also uses the language of covenant with the environment, which implies relationship. See *Laudato Si’*, nos. 209-215. This language of relationship and covenant can also be found in the work of Pope Benedict XVI, who speaks about a relationship with nature and about a “covenant” between the land and human beings. See, for example, Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace: If You Want To Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation,” 1 January 2010, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20091208_xliii-world-day-peace.html.

¹⁸ It should be noted here that the self-giving love that Pope Francis speaks about is directed both toward the community and toward the earth, and so communion is established with both.

Moreover, this gift of self, although not received and given back in mutual self-giving as in a communion of persons, still involves real reciprocity. Such reciprocity is implied in the language of relationship between the human person and creation. The person, through self-giving love, cares for and cultivates the earth, which in turn provides for humanity. Francis speaks about this reciprocal relationship as a “relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 67). Thus, even though this communion is not interpersonal, it does entail the reciprocal care and support of the other. In other words, the gift of the earth to the human person calls for a response, and the human gift of care for the earth in turn brings forth a response.

Mary Ashley makes clear the importance of the relationship between creation and the person. She argues for a personalist environmentalism that “attends to our relationships, and especially our direct encounters, with the life around us.”¹⁹ She proposes this personalist environmentalism in light of Pope Benedict XVI’s environmental ethic, and she argues that it is more satisfying given the human person’s fundamentally relational nature.²⁰ To this end, she points out that the Magisterium has spoken about the importance of cross-species kinship, and says, “The image of kinship is entirely consistent, however, with the personalist approach, given its emphasis on loving relationship, encounter, interaction, and care.”²¹ She even proposes to use family love as the model for environmental action on the basis that Benedict XVI calls for the family to be the prototype of every social order.²² Her personalist approach is particularly useful for this essay because it accents the reciprocal relationship between the person and creation.

¹⁹ Mary Ashley, “If You Want Responsibility, Build Relationship: A Personalist Approach to Benedict XVI’s Environmental Vision,” in *Environmental Justice and Climate Change: Assessing Pope Benedict XVI’s Ecological Vision for the Catholic Church in the United States*, ed. Jame Schaefer and Tobias Winright (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 19. This essay finds broad agreement with her work. At the same time, her work focuses largely on the environmental thought of Benedict XVI, whereas this essay puts Francis’s thought at the fore. Moreover, this essay is more focused on the role of the body, particularly as expressed in John Paul II’s *Man and Woman He Created Them*. Finally, this essay treats the category of encounter at significantly greater length.

²⁰ See Ashley, “A Personalist Approach,” 20–21.

²¹ Ashley, “A Personalist Approach,” 27.

²² Ashley, “A Personalist Approach,” 33.

THE ROLE OF ENCOUNTER

According to John Paul II, this language of the body reveals that the body has a fundamentally procreative and unitive meaning.²³ John Paul II develops the significance of this meaning for sexuality, but these two aspects have importance for the entirety of the human person's corporeal existence. In fact, the procreative and unitive meanings can serve as moral norms for appropriate interaction with the environment. First, the procreative aspect of care for the environment means that ecology should promote the abundance of life in all of its forms. This openness to life stresses the importance of protecting biodiversity. On this point, Pope Francis spends a section in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'* asserting that the gradual disappearance of biodiversity represents an important environmental problem (nos. 32-42). At the same time, this dimension means that authentic ecology must also promote the centrality of the human person. Any environmental action that protects nature at the expense of denigrating human life should be understood as a false environmentalism.²⁴

Second, the body carries a unitive meaning, which, while often not as controversial as the procreative meaning of the body in sexual ethics, plays a crucial and often overlooked role in environmental ethics. In sexual ethics, the bodily union of sexual intercourse should lead to a deepened personal communion that results from the giving of self in this act. Every sexual act must be open to this unitive aspect, which entails recognizing the other as gift. In environmental ethics, the human person's interaction with creation must be unitive in that it must lead to and deepen the relationship between creation and the person that was highlighted earlier. Technological or scientific "advances" that promise progress but distance the human person from the earth must be rejected on this account.

This unitive meaning of the body elucidates the parallel between John Paul II's anthropology and Francis's ecology most clearly: the logic of the body highlights the importance of encounter, which plays a central role in Francis's thought. According to John Paul II, the freedom of gift serves as the starting point from which "the communion of persons begins in which both encounter each other and give themselves reciprocally in the fullness of their subjectivity."²⁵ In other words, the communion of persons rests on the capacity of two persons to encounter one another and, in so doing, to give themselves to one another. Pope Francis also picks up on the idea of encounter and places it at the heart of his vision. He asserts, "I never tire of repeating those

²³ See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 617-620 and 644-647, especially 646. Paul VI, of course, asserts the same in *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12.

²⁴ Francis makes this point in a number of places. For example, see *Laudato Si'*, no. 90. It also appears in his emphasis on "integral ecology"; see nos. 137-162.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 201.

words of Benedict XVI which take us to the very heart of the Gospel: ‘Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 7). Encounter might even be described as a “dominant theme” of Francis’s pontificate.²⁶

Francis is clear that encounter stands as a key category for interpersonal relationships. According to *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction” (no. 88). This text not only underscores the importance of encountering others, but it also points out several key features of Francis’s understanding: authentic encounter requires sustained, face-to-face, bodily interaction that requires genuine listening and openness to the other.²⁷ Moreover, although Francis does not provide the argumentation in that text, in light of the first part of this essay, we can infer that the centrality of encounter results from the logic of the human body because it is the other’s “physical presence” that confronts us “face-to-face.”

Although the groundwork that has been laid so far opens the space to assert the place of encountering nature, Francis’s ecology nevertheless keeps the human person at its center. As a result, encounter must first take place with those people who suffer the most from the ecological devastation. The bishops of Appalachia, in their pastoral letter *This Land Is Home to Me*, underscore this theme, “But before we turn to this message from God, we must hear first the cry of Appalachia’s poor.”²⁸ They go on to assert the importance of nearness to the people that requires listening, especially to the poor and marginalized.²⁹ Pope

²⁶ See Michael Sean Winters, “Pope Francis and Encounter,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Aug. 19, 2013, www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/pope-francis-encounter.

²⁷ Space does not permit a full development of what Francis means by “encounter,” but broadly it seems to indicate the four key elements in the sentence above (sustained, bodily, face-to-face, genuine listening). For comments on the centrality of encounter, see Diego Fares, *The Heart of Pope Francis: How a New Culture of Encounter is Changing the Church and the World*, trans. Robert Hopcke (New York: Herder & Herder, 2015), 22, where he asserts that for Francis, “From an anthropological point of view, encounter is primary because it is our most human characteristic. ‘We are beings of encounter.’” In other words, the category of encounter is fundamental to his anthropology.

²⁸ Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *This Land Is Home to Me*, www.ccappal.org/CCA-book040307.pdf, 10. Pagination follows the 2007 online version that combines *This Land Is Home to Me* and *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995). Cited hereafter as *This Land*. See also Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *At Home in the Web of Life* (1995), www.ccappal.org/CCAbook040307.pdf. Cited hereafter as *Web of Life*.

²⁹ Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *This Land*, 32.

Francis similarly asserts that closeness to those who are suffering reveals the full truth of the environmental crisis. He gives three reasons: first, many of the poor live in the areas most impacted by global warming; second, their means of subsistence are often directly dependent on natural resources in activities like farming and fishing; third, they do not have the resources to adapt to climate change and environmental destruction (*Laudato Si'*, no. 25). Thus, there is "an intimate relationship" between the poor and the fragility of the planet (*Laudato Si'*, no. 16).³⁰

The role of closeness to the poor as the key to ecological renewal limits the usefulness of science and technology. Studies can reveal the science of climate change or deforestation and new technologies can limit environmental damage, but only encounter with those who suffer from these effects can reveal the full reality of the situation. Jon Sobrino points out that the suffering can be most honest about reality because they cannot take life for granted. Consequently, they also reveal the deepest truths of environmental destruction because they experience it as a lived reality and not simply as scientific observations.³¹ Along these lines, Francis observes that various forms of media and even scientific studies can "shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experience" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 47). A few paragraphs later, he returns to the point, "Lack of physical contact and encounter...can lead to a numbing of conscience and to tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality. At times this attitude even exists side by side with a 'green' rhetoric" (no. 49). These words provide a powerful reminder that authentic ecological work must be grounded in personal encounter. Even one's attendance at an academic conference on environmental protection, which obviously has great usefulness, must always be paired with a direct and bodily experience of the poor suffering from the effects of the environmental crisis. Without this experience of the marginalized, it runs the risk of becoming mere rhetoric that does not take root in hearts and does not lead to conversion.

This emphasis on encounter fits in well with Francis's call for a new understanding of solidarity (*Laudato Si'*, no. 16). In his comments on *Laudato Si'*, Rowan Williams notes that, for Pope Francis, solidarity serves as the criterion by which a particular policy can be understood as morally defensible or not.³² But Francis wants to make sure

³⁰ Twenty years before *Laudato Si'*, the Appalachian bishops articulated a similar point. See Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *Web of Life*, 47: "We too do not see the crisis of nature as separate from the crisis of the poor."

³¹ See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 85. Also see Roberto Goizueta, "To the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering," in *Vatican II: A Universal Call to Holiness*, eds. Anthony Ciorra and Michael Higgins (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2012), 65.

³² Williams, "Embracing Our Limits."

that this keystone of Catholic Social Teaching avoids becoming overly abstract. This fear already arises in the work of John Paul II, who, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, argues that solidarity cannot be understood as “a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far” (no. 38). Francis’s language of encounter now provides the framework to ensure that solidarity does not slip into these vague, distant feelings that accomplish little; rather, it must be rooted in physical contact with the marginalized.

For example, one cannot be in solidarity with those who suffered from the contamination of West Virginia’s Elk River in 2014 simply by advocating for better regulations for chemical storage and stricter penalties for damages caused, although certainly these actions are important. Spending time with those who were most affected, particularly those who were hospitalized and those who were without access to clean drinking water as a result of the spill, also emerges as crucial through the lens of encounter. Within this task, priority must be assigned to developing an intimacy with the poor for whom hospitalization and access to other water sources proved to be most burdensome.³³

Understanding solidarity as rooted in encounter also highlights the seriousness of the problem of absentee ownership, which has plagued and continues to plague Appalachia. The Appalachian bishops go so far as to compare absentee ownership to a cancer that drains the local community of its life.³⁴ One in-depth land study of Appalachia has shown that almost three quarters of land rights and more than four-fifths of mineral rights belong to absentee owners.³⁵ The centrality of

³³ For more on this story, see “CSB Releases Final Report into 2014 Freedom Industries Mass Contamination of Charleston, West Virginia Drinking Water,” *Huntington News*, September 29, 2016, www.huntingtonnews.net/142393.

³⁴ See Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *Web of Life*, 76

³⁵ Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force, “Land Ownership Patterns and Their Impacts on Appalachian Communities” (1981), www.crmw.net/files/1981_Land_Ownership_Study.pdf. While this study is now dated, it remains an important point of reference. Zachary Swick asserts that even today, “it remains unchallenged.” Zachary Swick, “Adaptive Policy and Governance: Natural Resources, Ownership, and Community Development in Appalachia,” *Appalachian Journal* 42 (2014): 39. An update of this study was undertaken in West Virginia in 2013, which suggested that absentee ownership in the state had declined somewhat, but “large out-of-state corporations still hold title to a great deal of the state’s privately owned land.” West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, “Who Owns West Virginia?” (December 2013), www.wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/land-study-paper-final3.pdf. Also see Elizabeth Payne, “Owning the Mountains: Appalachia’s History of Corporate Control,” *The Appalachian Voice*, February 19, 2016, www.apvoices.org/2016/02/18/corporate-land-ownership-appalachia/. For more on this original study, see Shaunna Scott, “The Appalachian Land Ownership Study Revisited,” *Appalachian Journal* 35 (2008): 236-252 and Shaunna Scott, “What Difference Did It Make? The Appalachian Land Ownership Study after Twenty-Five Years,” in *Confronting Ecological Crisis in Appalachia and the South: University and Community*

encounter provides a powerful argument against absentee ownership; any situation that prevents owners from a sustained and face-to-face experience with the people living on the land and impacted by their decisions now emerges as morally problematic. The problem consists not just in economic profits being drawn out of the region (which companies might promise to reinvest locally) but more fundamentally in the lack of real relationship.

This framework thus provides a new way of assessing various projects and developments. For example, the “Coalfields Expressway” project through southwest Virginia and stretching into West Virginia, which promises economic development, will involve the seizure of private property through eminent domain, thereby decreasing local ownership, and will re-route traffic away from already established towns and communities.³⁶ Both of these outcomes threaten the possibility of authentic encounter and reveal the project’s pitfalls (to say nothing about the devastating ecological effects of the mountaintop removal mining that will clear the path for the highway in the first place).

The encounter with the poor, moreover, takes on deeper meaning in a Christian context. If we assert with the Appalachian bishops that, before we hear the message from God, we must hear the cry of the poor, it is precisely because we hear the voice of God *in and through* the cry of the poor. The full beauty and power of the Gospel only shines most clearly in the lives of those who are suffering. In order to explain this point, Roberto Goizueta argues that God’s preferential love for the poor is a necessary consequence of His universal love:

To say that God’s love is universal is not to say that it is *neutral*. In fact, it is to say the very opposite: precisely *because* God’s love is universal, it cannot be neutral. If a mother finds that a fight has broken out between her strapping teenage son and his much smaller sister, the mother will not hesitate to try to ‘liberate’ the smaller girl from the brother’s clutches—precisely because the mother loves her two children equally.³⁷

Partnerships, eds. Stephanie McSpirit, Lynne Faltraco, Conner Bailey (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 39-59.

³⁶ Among other places, see Swick, “Adaptive Policy and Governance,” 40.

³⁷ Roberto Goizueta, “To the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering,” 66. Emphases in original. Also see p. 63-67 and 78. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 198, Pope Francis points out that the poor participate in the *sensus fidei* and know the suffering Christ. Also see Stephen Bevans, “The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World: Implications and Prospects,” *International Review of Mission* 103 (2014): 303, and Richard Gaillardetz, “The ‘Francis Moment’: A New Kairos for Catholic Ecclesiology,” *CTSA Proceedings* 69 (2014): 68.

In application to the environmental crisis, the principle that Goizueta articulates suggests that God's universal love is uniquely at work in the lives of those suffering from it.

In more personal terms, the encounter with those suffering from the environmental crisis reveals the face of the Lord Jesus. The concluding document from the fifth general conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (CELAM) held in Aparecida, Brazil, for which Cardinal Bergoglio was a key redactor, asserts, "The encounter with Jesus Christ in the poor is a constitutive dimension of our faith in Jesus Christ. Our option for them emerges from contemplation of his suffering face in them and from the encounter with Him in the afflicted and outcast...."³⁸ One might even call the awareness of the presence of the Lord Jesus in the encounter with the poor a mystical experience.³⁹

Witnessing the suffering of those who daily experience the effects of ecological devastation thus opens the way for an authentic Christian conversion because it is an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. This understanding provides a concrete way to understand what Pope Francis means in his claim that people need to undergo "an 'ecological conversion', whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 217). While prayer and devotional experiences may compel a Christian to greater environmental action, more often and more concretely, this ecological conversion takes place through the encounter with Christ who manifests himself in those suffering from environmental devastation. This experience thus reshapes the Christian's relationship to the environment as a result. In this way, Christian conversion is not a move away from the world but, on the contrary, entails a new awareness of the realities of the world.

After the centrality of encounter with the poor, the second important aspect of Francis's understanding of encounter is the encounter with the environment itself. This encounter with creation constitutes a tangible way that one lives out the relationship with the environment. To return to the logic of the body, the body reveals a fundamental dependence on the earth, whether one wants it or not. "Although we are often not aware of it, we depend on these larger [eco]systems for our

³⁸ Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, *Concluding Document*, (2007), www.aecrc.org/documents/Aparecida-Concluding%20Document.pdf, no. 257. See also Christopher Ruddy, "The Local and Universal Church," in *Go Into the Streets! The Welcoming Church of Pope Francis*, eds. Thomas Rausch and Richard Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 112, for his comments on the connection between Pope Francis and the Aparecida document.

³⁹ Maria Clara Bingemer, "A Church of the Poor," in *Go Into the Streets! The Welcoming Church of Pope Francis*, eds. Thomas Rausch and Richard Gaillardetz (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 32. This mystical encounter resonates with the judgment account in Matthew 25 and also finds close echoes in the work of Mother Teresa.

own existence" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 140). The category of encounter provides the means of realizing this dependence.

Wendell Berry helpfully draws out this foundational connection to the land and the perils of living as though this dependence did not exist. According to Berry, no matter how urban one's life is, one's body still lives by agriculture and so is fundamentally joined to the soil and to all other beings that live in and on it.⁴⁰ Too often, this basic and underlying connection is ignored and minimized, especially in a society in which only a very small percent of the population are involved with food production.⁴¹ Berry particularly decries the modern household, which divorces us from the sources of bodily life and becomes a place of consumption without being a place of production. In his words, "we no longer know the earth we came from, have no respect for it, keep no responsibilities to it."⁴² In reality, however, "The world that environs us, that is around us, is also within us. We are made of it; we eat, drink, and breathe it; it is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. It is also a Creation, a holy mystery... we also belong to it, and it makes certain rightful claims on us."⁴³

On his account, living disconnected from the earth and not fulfilling one's responsibilities toward it constitutes living a lie. A loss of values and ultimately the destruction both of creation and of humanity results from this disconnect between the body and the earth.⁴⁴ In Berry's view, the solution consists in reestablishing the awareness of this inescapable and fundamental connection. Put simply, "Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection is health."⁴⁵ Good farmers, whom he describes as "responsive partners in an intimate and mutual relationship" with the land, exemplify the connection between the earth and the human person.⁴⁶ Even for those who live in cities, they must live in balance with the surrounding countryside and assume some agricultural responsibility because it represents a more honest way of living.⁴⁷

Berry's work shows the importance of realizing the bond with the earth that results from the human person's embodied nature. It also supports Francis's emphasis on encounter, as the theme of encounter

⁴⁰ See Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 101.

⁴¹ Berry makes this point a number of times. See, for example, *Unsettling of America*, 144.

⁴² Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 56.

⁴³ Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community: Eight Essays* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 34.

⁴⁴ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 163-64. "The unsettlement at once of population and of values is virtually required by the only generally acceptable forms of aspiration."

⁴⁵ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 144.

⁴⁶ Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 91.

⁴⁷ See Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*, 21-25.

provides the means of restoring the broken connections that Berry perceives as so problematic. In other words, if the relationship between the earth and the human person is to be restored, it will come by way of genuine encounter with creation. This encounter with creation takes place on several levels. On one level, such an encounter involves spending time in pristine nature. Pope Francis cites John Paul II, who speaks of “contemplat[ing] with wonder the universe in all its grandeur and beauty” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 238).⁴⁸ In northern Appalachia, this sort of encounter requires spending time among the forests and rivers, hiking along the mountain ridges and valleys, sitting beside the streams, and being surrounded by the plants, animals, and trees.

While this type of encounter with the environment cannot stand by itself, it often serves as a starting place for deeper conversion.⁴⁹ The experience of overwhelming natural beauty can break through one's preconceived notions, instill humility, and inspire further conversion. Moreover, it often challenges one with an overwhelming sense of God as Creator.⁵⁰ In their 1995 pastoral letter, *At Home in the Web of Life*, the Catholic bishops of Appalachia use the image of the forests as a cathedral. “To dwell in these mountains and forests, and with their trees and plants and animals, is truly to dwell in Earth's community of life, as one of God's awesome cathedrals. In this magnificent work of God's creation, misty mountain haze is holy incense, tall tree trunks are temple pillars, sun-splashed leaves are stained glass, and songbirds are angelic choirs.”⁵¹ The cathedrals of creation thus open the space for a genuine experience of the divine. At the same time, like encountering the poor, the encounter with nature must be rooted in one's bodily presence. God is present *in* nature, not just manifested *through* nature. In the words of Pope Francis, nature “not only manifests God but is also a locus of his presence” (*Laudato Si'*, no. 88).

⁴⁸ Also see John Paul II, *Catechesis* (2 August 2000), 4: *Insegnamenti* 23/2 (2000), 112.

⁴⁹ See Anselma Dolcich-Ashley, “American Nature Writing As a Critically-Appropriated Resource for Catholic Ecological Ethics,” in *Environmental Justice and Climate Change: Assessing Pope Benedict XVI's Ecological Vision for the Catholic Church in the United States*, eds. Jame Schaefer and Tobias Winright (New York: Lexington Books, 2013), 251, where she notes that the works of authors like Muir and Thoreau can be useful because they can serve as an invitation to spiritual conversion. Even Wendell Berry, who is critical of an overly-romantic sense of “wilderness” and particularly rejects the sense of the “scenic,” still recognizes the importance of an encounter with the margins. For him, the wilderness, that is, that which human activity has not disrupted, serves to instill humility in us, because it is the place where we submit rather than conquer. Wilderness impacts us, rather than us impacting it. Berry, *Unsettling of America*, 34.

⁵⁰ See Dolcich-Ashley, “American Nature Writing,” 243, and *Laudato Si'*, no. 126, where Francis points out that the monks sought the wilderness as a place for encountering God.

⁵¹ Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *Web of Life*, 56.

Therefore, nature must not be seen as an instrument that can be discarded once one has encountered God through it. Francis later speaks about the mystical meaning found “in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face” (no. 233). In this sense, the physical nature of the encounter with creation is irreducible.

Pope Francis also envisions the encounter with nature to include the experience of nature in daily life. Observing this facet ensures that one does not idealize the meaning of encounter to include only extraordinary and emotionally-charged experiences. In accord with the key elements of encounter described earlier, encountering nature in everyday experience does not take place on its own but requires genuine openness that begins with the awareness of the other. Along these lines, David Cloutier warns of the danger of “neglect[ing] nature’s beautiful form that is all around us.”⁵² The failure to attend to this everyday beauty often leads to the protection of only limited, ‘scenic’ places and to the destruction of the rest of creation. Thus, witnessing the goodness of creation can and should happen in one’s backyard, in the park at the end of the block, and in the glimpse of the river running through the city.

Pope Francis points to this sense of encounter with nature in the everyday when he observes that Jesus “was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world because he himself was in constant touch with nature, lending it an attention full of fondness and wonder. As he made his way throughout the land, he often stopped to contemplate the beauty sown by his Father” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 97). Francis also points to this type of everyday encounter when he speaks about the need to design urban spaces which increase a sense of belonging and rootedness with the land. Additionally, he asserts the importance of designating protected spaces in both urban and rural settings (nos. 150-51). Wendell Berry argues for the importance of this everyday encounter more simply: “If you want to see where you are, you will have to get out of your spaceship, out of your car, off your horse, and walk over the ground.”⁵³ Additionally, genuine encounter with the creation of everyday life must include experiencing crop and livestock production because the results of these processes serve as daily sustenance. Failure to be attentive to these basic aspects of bodily life constitutes living a lie by neglecting to acknowledge one’s dependence.

Additionally, this sense of encounter with nature must be pressed even further. If God is particularly to be encountered in those who are suffering and to be encountered in nature then the continuation of this logic suggests that the face of God is particularly revealed in places

⁵² David Cloutier, *Walking God’s Earth: The Environment and Catholic Faith* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 8.

⁵³ Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, & Community*, 20.

where the created world is suffering the effects of environmental devastation. God reveals God's self on the mountaintops stripped bare from mining, in the forests that have been clear-cut for logging, in the flood waters that threaten communities, in the abandoned mines filled with other people's garbage, and in the waters that "run orange with acid."⁵⁴ This approach finds support in *Evangelii Gaudium*, where Francis repeatedly speaks of encountering Christ in the marginalized and then highlights the fate of "weak and defenseless beings who are frequently at the mercy of economic interests and indiscriminate exploitation. I am speaking of creation as a whole.... Thanks to our bodies, God has joined us so closely to the world around us that we can feel the desertification of the soil almost as a physical ailment, and the extinction of a species as a painful disfigurement" (no. 215). In other words, the body links the person to the physical world, and one experiences the destruction of the environment as a physical pain when he or she encounters that suffering face to face. In turn, this suffering can become a place of privileged experience with the Cross and Resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, Francis's theology of encounter plays a fundamental role in his ecological vision. Further, this theology, in all of its various dimensions, is rooted in the language of the body, although clearly in ways that go far beyond the sexual. Caring for the environment involves the bodily experiences of both self-giving love and receptivity to the other. This emphasis in turn points to the importance of the human's connection to the earth and provides the foundation for the significance of encounter. Encounter thus provides the means by which this approach overcomes what Francis calls the "throwaway culture." In this way, Francis's aim appears strikingly similar to John Paul II's goal to overcome use and consumption in his theology of the body. Both approaches reject technological mastery in favor of self-gift. In this way, Francis has provided a rich vision for ecological reform that stands in deep continuity with John Paul II's anthropology and that does not degrade the principal place of the human person.

LOCAL CHURCH AS THE PLACE OF ENCOUNTER

As was pointed out, encounter requires the "real and sincere closeness" between people that blossoms into friendship (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 199).⁵⁵ This bodily dimension requires an emphasis on

⁵⁴ Rev. John Rausch, "Introduction" to the 2000 combined Version of *This Land and Web of Life*.

⁵⁵ There can be a certain temptation when we speak of encounter with the poor to picture trips to other parts of the country, continent, and world that bring us face to face with a kind of suffering that is literally foreign to us. The model here is the "mission trip." These trips have value. But, for Pope Francis, this temporary interaction does not typify encounter. Encounter means a sustained bodily interaction that takes place over a long period of time and thus can blossom into enduring friendship.

locality because it involves people repeatedly spending time with one another. As a result, I suggest four interconnected ways that local churches can facilitate encounter. First, the Appalachian bishops' letter *This Land Is Home To Me* calls for the creation of "Centers of Reflection and Prayer."⁵⁶ In "Sustainable Communities and Eucharistic Communities," Lucas Briola notes that Bishop Joseph Hodges established four of these pastoral centers in the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.⁵⁷ These centers can and do serve as places of encounter with the created world and so can allow creation to confront people in their smallness. This confrontation moves people to wonder and awe, opens them to the presence of God, and begins the process of conversion. Moreover, the centrality of these centers must continue to be expanded. Encounter with the beauty of the created world is not something that can be limited to those privileged few that have both the time and the resources to "get away" for a weekend on retreat. Rather, encounter with creation stands as fundamental to the life of the Christian in Francis's vision. Thus, the use of these centers must be expanded so that ordinary people have the opportunity to reap their benefits on a regular basis. This expansion will certainly include greater funding, a larger number of programs available to the public, and a greater emphasis on the importance of encounter with creation.

Secondly, places are also needed where Christians can serve those suffering the impact of eco-devastation and where they can witness the harm humans have done to the environment. The Appalachian bishops seem to recognize something along these lines when, immediately after calling for the establishment of pastoral centers for reflection and prayer, they pick up Paul VI's call for the creation of "Centers for Popular Culture," which they understand "as a sign of the Church's concern, linked to the broader action centers, places where the poor feel welcome."⁵⁸ These centers, in the various forms they may take, must be places of encounter with the poor and with creation. The work of the Sisters of Mercy in Pocahontas, VA, stands out as a model in this regard.⁵⁹ After the local mine had closed, they helped establish the Center for Christian Action to help revitalize the town, including turning the abandoned exhibition mine into a tourist center and creating various social outreach programs. This center facilitated an experience of the environment, even where it had been damaged, and an encounter with the poor.

⁵⁶ Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *This Land*, 33.

⁵⁷ Lucas Briola, "Sustainable Communities and Eucharistic Communities: *Laudato Si'*, Northern Appalachia, and Redemptive Recovery," *Journal of Moral Theology* Vol. 6, Special Issue 1 (2017): 22-33. Briola also argues for the importance of these centers.

⁵⁸ Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *This Land*, 34.

⁵⁹ See Catholic Bishops of Appalachia, *Web of Life*, 42, where Carolyn Brink, RSM, highlights this story.

Third, the local church must advocate for the everyday experience of the environment. As was pointed out, Pope Francis speaks about the design of neighborhoods, public spaces, and communities. In the same section, he comments, “It is not enough to seek the beauty of design. More precious still is the service we offer to another kind of beauty: people’s quality of life, their adaptation to the environment, encounter and mutual assistance” (*Laudato Si’*, no. 150). The local church is uniquely situated to advocate for urban spaces that are conducive to encounter between persons because local churches are rooted in particular places and are invested in those communities. This advocacy involves not only an activism as communities are created and revitalized, but it also requires repeated encouragement of Christians about the importance of encounter. This exhortation will largely take the form of preaching, which must have diocesan support and encouragement for its greatest effectiveness. This preaching must start with the bishops, among whose duties, *Lumen Gentium* asserts, “the preaching of the Gospel occupies an eminent place” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 25).

Fourth, the local church must facilitate ongoing projects that bring together people from parishes in various socioeconomic settings. Often parishes represent particular ethnic or socioeconomic portions of the population, so inter-parochial work is essential. These projects can take on many different forms, including service projects for environmental restoration, advocacy and awareness campaigns, prayer events, and corporal works of mercy. Whatever specific form they take, they must open the space for encounter between rich and poor and between people and the environment. In this sense, they must be ongoing in order to allow genuine friendships to develop, they must be rooted in real contact with the created world (especially where it has been polluted), and they must bring people from various backgrounds together with those who are suffering.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued for the value of bringing together Francis’s ecological vision and John Paul II’s “theology of the body” because it highlights the foundational role of bodily encounter. Before concluding, two other reasons that situating Francis’s ecology and John Paul II’s anthropology together are worth mentioning, even though they are less directly connected to environmental issues. First, although not fleshed out in any detail here, understanding *Laudato Si’* ultimately as an expansion of the theology of the body can provide a much needed social context for a personalist view of marriage that too often ends up sounding almost entirely closed in on itself. Many authors have criticized the theology of the body along these lines. The personalist account of marriage and sexuality tends to, in the words of David

McCarthy, “lack social complexity.”⁶⁰ Moreover, we may add, it lacks environmental complexity. Thus, Francis’s work expands this theology of the body not only to a social understanding but also to an ecological one.

Second, linking the understanding of the body in the work of Francis and John Paul II provides a connection to cut across some ideological divides in the Catholic Church. The importance of this claim rests first on my own concern regarding the increasing polarization present not only in American culture and politics but also, even more disturbingly, among American Catholics. The observation also relies on my experience with many Catholic young people that “theology of the body Catholics” tend not to be “*Laudato Si*’ Catholics.” Certainly there are exceptions, but it seems that faithful Catholics generally tend either toward listening to Christopher West talks or toward advocating for environmental policy change but not both. As a result, this theological connection might serve as a meeting point in the attempt to overcome ideology. This overcoming of ideologies provides a fitting way to end an essay on encounter precisely because encounter entails experiencing each person in his or her own fullness. **M**

⁶⁰ David Matzko McCarthy, *Sex and Love in the Home*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2004), 111.