

WORKING WITH THE GRAMMAR OF CREATION: BENEDICT XVI, WENDELL BERRY, AND THE UNITY OF THE CATHOLIC MORAL VISION¹

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“It is exactly this logic—the gift comes first, before us—that Benedict insists is true about the environment, about technology, about sexuality, and about life itself. Indeed, it is a feature at the heart of Benedict’s entire theological trajectory.”



Many have commented that one of the most innovative features of Pope Benedict XVI’s social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, is making explicit the connection between the Church’s social ethics and the Church’s teaching on sexual and “life” issues. This can be seen especially in the connection drawn between environmental and sexual teachings, which in one place the encyclical calls the “grammar of creation.” However, the encyclical does not go into much detail about how to construe these connections, ones which

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have been controversial in the recent history of Catholic ethics.² In this paper, I seek to demonstrate two things: one, how these connections rely on Benedict's overall theological vision of creation and eschatology, and two, how essayist Wendell Berry's work fleshes out three ways in which this connection needs to be understood and practiced in contemporary American society: a humility in coming to recognize the complex pattern of creation, the importance of good work as a discipline for revealing and participating in this pattern, and the necessary mediating role of local communities and cultures in forming and reforming us according to this pattern.

1. *The grammar of creation:
gift and solidarity*

Daniel Finn, in commenting on *Caritas in veritate*, notes that one of its "distinctive contributions" is "the encyclical's comprehensive integration of all life issues, an effort to link concerns about procreation, biomedical developments, social justice, and threats to the environment."³ No doubt this is one of the factors that makes the encyclical seem a bit sprawling in its scope. There are four key sections where the pope brings up issues that are not usually covered in "social ethics" and links them to social ethics in distinctive, though preliminary, ways. I will look at these instances, and then pull back to place them within the overall themes of the encyclical and of Benedict's work as a whole.

First, in the course of surveying the "signs of the times" since Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*, Benedict notes a connection

²The classic essay contending that, especially after Vatican II, the two "areas" of ethics proceeded on different and ultimately conflicting bases is Charles Curran, "Official Catholic Social and Sexual Teachings: A Methodological Comparison," in *Readings in Moral Theology, no. 8: Dialogue About Catholic Sexual Teaching*, ed. Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 536–58. My argument here is not a direct response to Curran's essay; it is reflective of what appears to be a genuine development beyond both the "classicist" and the "historically conscious" approaches, beyond both the "naturalism" and "personalism" of earlier papal writings.

³Daniel Finn, "Economics of Charity," *Commonweal* 136, no. 14 (14 August 2009), 9.

between “poverty and underdevelopment” and questions about “the acceptance of life.”⁴ Here he mentions issues like forced abortions and infant mortality; however, his point is larger: “Openness to life is at the center of true development. When a society moves toward the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable to society also wither away. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fibre and makes people capable of mutual help” (28). The connection Benedict draws here seems less applicable to contexts of forced abortions and more to those who promote “an anti-birth mentality” and try to “export” it “as if it were a form of cultural progress” (28).

How is the connection to be understood? The pope indicates that such societies are ultimately apathetic—that a closure to new life indicates a kind of weakness or withering away of the desire to live, and especially to live in solidarity with others. A very similar logic is indicated in the second place of connection. The pope here is speaking about the problem of the notion of “rights” running roughshod over concepts of shared duties. He mentions concerns about population growth, and points to “the decline in births” in many countries, as well as the reduction of sexuality “to pleasure or entertainment” (44). Such a reduction always leads to “various forms of violence” that arise out of a solely materialistic understanding of sexuality. Yet, he also claims that “morally responsible openness to life represents a rich social and economic resource.” Such openness to life has fostered development in nations due to “the size of their population and the talents of their people.” On the other hand, nations with declining populations and small families “run the risk of impoverishing social relations and failing to ensure effective forms of solidarity. These situations are symptomatic of scant confidence in the future and moral weariness” (44). Once again, sexual liberation and contraception are not a sign of energy or progress, but rather of societal decline, of a “weary,” apathetic society that is not interested in solidarity. In this case, with the focus on “entertainment,” one might conjure up the desperate hedonists of the celebrity culture (and those who consume it), for whom

⁴*Caritas in veritate*, 28. Further references in the text.

amusement and gossip (a sin, last time I checked) have replaced mutual social commitment. But the glamour of the entertainment lifestyle, the pope implies, conceals a weariness and despair.

A different sort of connection is drawn in the third section, during Benedict's discussion of the environment. He has already noted that "nature expresses a design of love and truth," an "inbuilt order" or a "grammar, which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation" (48). We have clearly violated that order. We have done so in many ways, but the pope argues that "the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa" (51). Lifestyles "prone to hedonism and consumerism" not only destroy the social fabric, but also the environmental fabric. However, "the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society." He writes: "If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation, and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves" (51).

Rather than drawing on the theme of general social apathy indicative of despair, the pope here suggests that a presumptuous refusal to recognize and respect the given order of nature is what connects these issues. Respect for the dignity of persons and the integrity of the environment are one, because creation is one. We threaten it by our presumptions to make such an order ourselves, by our wills, rather than receive it and work with the natural order as a gift that is "prior to us" (48).

This theme of *presumption* is echoed in the final place where the pope makes a connection, this time between bioethical issues and his discussion of technology. While the pope affirms the basic themes on technology set out in *Laborem exercens*, he warns that such technology "must serve to reinforce the covenant between human beings and the environment, a covenant that should mirror God's love" (69). Often, instead of reinforcing that covenant, technology is deceptive. How so? "A person's development is compromised, if he claims to be solely responsible for producing what he becomes. By analogy, the development of peoples goes awry if humanity thinks it can recreate itself through the 'wonders' of technology"

(68). This “illusion” of self-creation is at the root of the questions of bio-technology (74). Ultimately, such technology does not make for wonders, but for the violation of the natural order, a violation that is a mark of “today’s highly disillusioned culture, which believes it has mastered every mystery” (75). In this final remark, the notion of human presumption is tied back to the earlier theme of cultural “disillusionment.” It points forward to the culmination of the letter, which states a theme that is a hallmark of Benedict’s thought: “Without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is” (78). Benedict does not here simply mean that people need to go to church; rather, they need to inhabit a culture of “world-wide integration that is open to transcendence” (42). A culture that is incapable of social solidarity is one that is not open to God, and a culture not open to God is ultimately incapable of genuine social solidarity. Why? Ultimately because it oscillates destructively between an attitude of cold presumption and a lifestyle of distraction-filled despair.

Between presumption and despair lies genuine hope, and such hope is grounded in two characteristic themes, not only of this encyclical, but of Benedict’s whole work. First, the most important theme of *Caritas in veritate* is a social ethic based on “gift,” on “the principle of gratuitousness” (34). Such a principle represents a belief in “hope” which “bursts into our lives as something not due to us, something that transcends every law of justice” (34). It is something that is first of all “given to us,” always “received” (34). This logic is so important that Benedict states: “While in the past it was possible to argue that justice had to come first and gratuitousness could follow afterwards, as a complement, today it is clear that without gratuitousness, there can be no justice in the first place” (38).

This notion that the gift comes first, and is a prerequisite of justice, is not just a nice piece of theory. Benedict insists repeatedly that it must be embodied in practice, spending a substantial part of the encyclical advocating for economic firms, associations, and networks that embody this logic. But it is exactly this logic—the gift comes first, before us—that Benedict insists is true about the environment, about technology, about sexuality, and about life itself. Indeed, it is a feature at the heart of Benedict’s entire theological trajectory. In his early *Introduction to Christianity*, he narrates a “decline” narrative of belief in which “the priority of the logos” is gradually overrun, first by the “facts” of history, and then ultimately

by the imperatives of “techne,” such that we come to regard the world as having no order other than the one we impose—often in the name of “justice.”⁵ By contrast, Benedict’s constructive theology maintains that “Christian faith in God means first the decision in favor of the primacy of the logos as against mere matter.”⁶ Such a creation does not point to a mathematical watchmaker god; instead, Benedict says we find, in addition to “mathematical” order, “equally present in the world unparalleled and unexplained wonders of beauty,” and here uses the beauty of the apple blossom in the process of fertilization as an example.⁷ Benedict contrasts the belief in logos with materialism, a counterpart which assumes that matter is simply there for our minds to shape into meaning and beauty.⁸

Our culture often displays a sort of schizophrenia on these issues. While some may manifest an appreciation for the priority of gift in terms of environmental protection, the same individuals can display a refusal to do so in terms of human life or human sexuality, which are viewed as open to complete manipulation. One *New York Times* reader comment, in discussing abortion, conveyed this logic exactly: when faced with the question of when a fetus is a human life, the commenter wrote, “It is a life when the mother chooses it to be.”⁹ Imagine if someone made the same comment

⁵*Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 57–69. This narrative is strikingly similar to the one of modern progress critiqued in *Spe salvi*, nos. 16–23, where Francis Bacon’s approach to nature takes on the role of the enemy. Benedict sees Marx as the apotheosis of this transformation (thus, his concerns about liberation theology), but, in both of these works and others (e.g., “Liberation Theology,” in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne [New York: HarperOne, 2007], 217–25), the pope criticizes Christianity itself for narrowing its message in such a way as to allow this distortion of what is in fact a real truth. Surely part of the reason for *Caritas in veritate*’s length and detail is a desire on the pope’s part to outline as fully as possible the true alternative.

⁶*Introduction to Christianity*, 151.

⁷*Ibid.*, 154–55.

⁸Such a belief is ultimately related to (right) worship, and rests on an acknowledgement of the primacy of receptivity exemplified in such things as “the holy day.” See Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 75, 82–83.

⁹See Lisa Belkin, “Choosing Not to Keep the Baby,” *The New York Times* (16

about the value of the Amazon rain forest! Yet others in the culture, keen to preserve life and the sanctity of marriage, often show a reckless disregard for any questions relating to the natural environment. Many of this latter group are Christians or Catholics, and they simply replicate the schizophrenia in reverse. They so emphasize “the dignity of the person” that the place of such dignity in the goodness of the whole creation is ignored. Creation is accepted as a set of raw materials subject to cost/benefit analysis only. In both cases, there is a contradictory logic on display at either side of a divide that appears at the bright line of the human body. Outside the body, one set of rules apply. To the body itself, a different set applies. Benedict’s connection is predicated on the notion that the *same* logic of gift needs to apply on all these issues.

The specifically Christian side of this failure is due to a distortion of eschatological hope, which no longer recognizes the cosmic and human unity of God’s reconciliation. Thus, the second characteristic theme: the importance of human solidarity as essential to Christian eschatology (and vice versa). The importance of human solidarity so drives *Caritas in veritate* that the pope insists on the “urgent need of a true world political authority” (67). Yet, at the same time, even in the same section, the pope spends time pointing out the importance of small, local forms of solidarity that embody gratuitousness. If everything begins with gift, everything also drives toward an end that is consistent with gift, which is the solidarity manifest in charity in truth.

Here it is important to keep in mind the pope’s encyclical *Spe salvi*, which so explicitly endorses Henri de Lubac’s vision of salvation—of the ultimate Christian hope—as social.¹⁰ In that encyclical, Benedict chides modern Christianity because it “has to a large extent restricted its attention to the individual and his salvation . . . has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize sufficiently the greatness of its task.”¹¹ How does this relate to the pope’s themes here? Evidently the pope recognizes that

June 2009). Online: <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/choosing-not-to-keep-the-baby/>.

¹⁰*Spe salvi*, 13–15. For an elaboration of sacramental individualism as “the supreme misunderstanding of what a sacrament truly is” (49), and further on the importance of salvation as social, see Ratzinger, *Principles*, 44–55.

¹¹*Spe salvi*, 25.

the “disillusion” of modern secularity and its inane materialistic notions of progress have their root in an unfortunate “individualizing” of Christian eschatology. As I mentioned earlier, the pope relies on a vision of modern secular persons as suffering from a kind of malaise that is ultimately a refusal of solidarity with others and a pursuit of individual amusement.¹² This anemic individualism allows social solidarity to atrophy, because human energy is no longer devoted to goals of solidarity. Yet it is important to recognize that such individualism can and does infect Christianity in eschatologies that also fail to reach toward full human solidarity. The “narrowing” of Christian hope to the individual soul allows the space for purely secular narratives of earthly progress to redefine and capture visions of solidarity. Thus, Benedict seeks to recover both a proper ontology and a dynamic, collective teleology. The logic of the world does not only begin with a grammar of creation, but ends with a social symphony of solidarity and praise. The refusal of life and of the family is indicative of a despair about such a vision of the goal of human life. The goal is now reduced to the individual.

Thus, the pope’s vision is rooted in an ontology of gift and a teleology of universal solidarity. These apply not simply to persons, but to all of creation—they are its grammar and punctuation. Such themes are not merely “new” to this encyclical, but reflect the emphases characteristic of Benedict’s theological vision. It is a vision worked out carefully over time, based fundamentally on a vision of post-Christian humanity lost between presumption and despair, and a Christianity only stumblingly able to identify the ontology of gift and the eschatology of solidarity that is needed to give the world real hope. It is these twin perils of presumption and despair that overshadow not only the economy, but all ethical issues.

¹²Noteworthy in this regard is a shift from a secular eschatological enthusiasm at the time of Vatican II to a postmodern pluralism and fragmentation today. While it would require another essay to develop this idea, Benedict rightly recognizes that secular environmentalism is the last counterweight within secular humanism to *both* the tyranny of instrumental science *and* the dominance of postmodern, pluralistic fragmentation. Benedict rejects both of these ideologies strongly, but (as we’ll see) embraces environmentalism because it attempts to retain something of the universal solidarity teleology.

2. *Speaking the grammar:*
Wendell Berry and the American context

Yet this is a social encyclical. How might we live, in practical terms, rooted in gift and driving toward solidarity? What do we need to see in the American context, specifically, especially to make the connections among the grammar of these often-separated areas of Catholic ethics? In the American context, I contend that there is no better interpreter than the farmer, poet, and essayist Wendell Berry. Berry's work has begun to receive some attention in Christian circles, but the encyclical is likely to drive this attention much further.¹³ Why? Simply because Berry's work so exemplifies the sort of social vision the pope outlines. There are many connections to be made, but in this essay, I want to point to three concrete features of Berry's work that will be helpful in describing in more detail what is necessary in our culture in order to understand and live out the connections between social, sexual, and life ethics. Berry's work also makes clear how we are apt to fail to make these connections.

a. *Distinguishing true and false patterns*

At the heart of Berry's work is a conviction about the pattern of nature, a pattern which he seeks to discover through the careful practice of farming. He is sometimes called an "agrarian writer," and he notes the influence of the "Southern agrarians" on his work. Yet he worries that, for some of these writers, their agrarianism "is abstract, too purely mental . . . too often remote from the issues of practice."¹⁴ Berry's own life is "forcibly removed" from "abstraction," and instead "must submit to the unending effort

¹³For example, see J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens, *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life: A Reader's Guide* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), and *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, ed. Joel J. Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2009). Also see a special edition of *Communio*, "Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Conference: 'The Unsettling of America,'" ed. David L. Schindler, *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27 (2000): 58–170.

¹⁴Wendell Berry, "Imagination in Place," in *The Way of Ignorance* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2005), 44.

to change one's mind and ways to fit one's farm."¹⁵ But ultimately such effort is aimed at "seeing in nature the inescapable standard and in natural processes the necessary pattern for any human use of the land."¹⁶

The patterns are discovered through *ignorance* and *discipline*. "Ignorance" here refers to a "humbling knowledge" that is "a way of acknowledging the uniqueness of every individual creature, deserving respect, and the uniqueness of every moment, deserving wonder."¹⁷ Such a way of proceeding acknowledges limits, both in oneself and in the human condition. Since we are often uncomfortable with such limits, hewing to them also requires discipline. In preferring a lack of discipline, we ordinarily end up allowing our desires to determine what we will do and how we will do it. However, "we have, in fact, no right to ask the world to conform to our desires."¹⁸

All of this is reflective of discovering the world as a gift, as something given to us and prior to us, by a power far greater than ourselves. Further, it requires us to accept the pattern of the world as extremely complicated and particular—this is the part we dislike, because genuine knowledge of the pattern must come through humbling ignorance and discipline. Berry summarizes his mission in an interview by saying, "I've understood that my job as an advocate has been to speak of the issues in something like their real complexity."¹⁹ We are unable to do so because, Berry claims, we are instead enamored by the "grand oversimplifications" presented to us by the industrial economy. It is the industrial economy which presents us with a world that is far too easily grasped, doing so "by means of simplifications too extreme and oppressive to merit the name of thought."²⁰ Indeed, in one essay, Berry chides those who claim he

¹⁵Ibid., 46.

¹⁶Ibid., 47.

¹⁷Berry, "The Way of Ignorance," in *The Way of Ignorance*, 67.

¹⁸Berry, "The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity," in *Another Turn of the Crank* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995), 83.

¹⁹Berry, *Conversations with Wendell Berry*, ed. Morris Allen Grubbs (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 200.

²⁰Berry, "Out of Your Car, Off Your Horse," in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 19.

represents an ideal of “simplicity,” saying, “I am obliged to reply that I gave up the simple life when I left New York City in 1964 and came here.”²¹

Thus, what happens in the contemporary world is that, refusing the humbling acknowledgment of our vast ignorance and the need for exacting personal discipline in discovering even parts of this pattern, we substitute oversimplified “patterns” that supposedly comprehend things (no more ignorance) and “make things easy” (no more discipline). A pertinent environmental example is the tendency to regard untouched nature as either pure and pristine or mere raw material for human use. Throughout Berry’s work, he expresses a skepticism about conservationists bent on “preserving wilderness,” usually a considerable distance from where anyone lives or works. Such preservation comes at the expense of other “non-preserved” places (usually where we live and work) which are simply subject to exploitation.²² Battles over the spotted owl, or over animal rights, create a conflict between those who trust the pattern of industrial and scientific exploitation and those who refuse this pattern in favor of taking refuge in some sort of “given” nature. Michael Northcott, in his survey of various approaches to environmental ethics, also juxtaposes utilitarian approaches that focus on “aggregate human utility” with deontological approaches that defend the preservation of nature by way of analogies to duties “to preserve aesthetic beauty in art objects.”²³ Northcott identifies how these approaches try to impose overly simplified patterns on the actual patterns of life, thereby failing to pay attention to much that is crucial.

This conflict between environmental romanticism and industrial capitalism, two oversimplified patterns, also appears in virtually the same form in our thinking about human sexuality. Indeed, Berry argues that our sexual lives are governed primarily by a “sexual romanticism,” that worships “true love,” trying to defend against the “sexual capitalism” of purely instrumental use of sex for

²¹Berry, “Imagination in Place,” 47–48.

²²See, for example, “Conservation is Good Work,” in *Sex, Economy*, 27–43, and “Getting Along With Nature,” in *Home Economics* (New York: North Point, 1987), 6–20. In *The Unsettling of America*, he dubs this approach “vacation-oriented” conservation (27).

²³Michael Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 92, 98.

pleasure.²⁴ Sexual capitalists, he remarks, are merely disillusioned sexual romantics. As he puts it wryly, “The sexual romantic croons, ‘You be-long to me.’ The sexual capitalist believes the same thing, but has stopped crooning.”²⁵ An oversimplified pattern of possessive ownership replaces the much more complex mutual belonging that is marriage.

Summarizing these oversimplified grammars in an essay on language, Berry diagnoses its “increasing unreliability” by explaining two types of language that fail to be accountable in their imprecision, and hence oversimplification. One kind of language is “diminished by subjectivity, which ends in meaninglessness”²⁶ This is the language of expressivist romanticism. But then there is also “a language diminished by objectivity, or so-called objectivity (inordinate or irresponsible ambition), which ends in confusion.”²⁷ This is the language of specialization, which Berry so often derides, a language characteristic especially of industrial science, but which also infects most areas of knowledge. Both these sorts of language, in different ways, ultimately dispense with the matter of truth, insofar as they fail to be accountable to the reality which they are trying to designate. Therefore, the languages are useful for concealing ignorance, but also for attempting supposed knowledge of things without the practices of discipline actually required.²⁸

Berry’s categories provide a helpful challenge to Catholic thought. Catholic ethics often has a great deal more to say about sexual ethics and its normative “patterns” than about the environment. It is as if the tradition, deeply worried about sexual subjectivism, develops a language meant to defend against it, but then allows the languages of science (biology, economics, etc.) to have its way with the rest of creation beyond the bounds of the human body. This approach can tend to polarize Catholic argument in ways that

²⁴Wendell Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977), 117.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 119.

²⁶Wendell Berry, “Standing by Words,” in *Standing by Words* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker and Hoard, 2005; orig. 1983), 25.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸For example, later in the essay, Berry derides a writing textbook for telling its students in its initial pages that they already have “a more or less complete mastery of the English language” (27).

mimic the cultural oversimplifications. Northcott looks at earlier magisterial teaching on the environment and worries about a “deeply humanocentric interpretation of the Christian tradition of natural law,” one that does not recognize that the value of human life is not the sole and exclusive focus of the natural law.²⁹ In the present encyclical, Benedict is clearly signaling the desire to move beyond such an interpretation, to a more holistic, more traditional understanding of natural law in a cosmological sense. Such a move, he believes, offers an avenue to draw modern secular societies back to the natural law through their concern for the environment.³⁰ Such concern is seen throughout his writings. Even before his papacy, the pope stated that “it seems clear to me that it is in fact man who threatens to rob nature of its life’s breath.”³¹ And he is quite aware of the vast magnitude of the practical problem, often mentioning it in talks and speeches.³²

²⁹Northcott, *Environment*, 136–37.

³⁰See John Allen’s indication of this strategy in “Benedict XVI’s Very Own Shade of Green,” *National Catholic Reporter* (31 July 2009). Online at <http://ncronline.org>. Also see Allen, “For Benedict, Environmental Movement Promises Recovery of Natural Law Tradition,” *National Catholic Reporter* (27 July 2007), also available at ncronline.org.

³¹Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 230.

³²“The promotion of sustainable development and particular attention to climate change are indeed matters of grave importance for the entire human family, and no nation or business sector should ignore them. As scientific research demonstrates the worldwide effects that human actions can have on the environment, the complexity of the vital relationship between the ecology of the human person and the ecology of nature becomes increasingly apparent” (“Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to H.E. Mr. Noel Fahey New Ambassador of Ireland to the Holy See” [15 September 2007], 5. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2007/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070915_ambassador-ireland_en.html). And on the flight to Australia for World Youth Day, he describes his vision of the earth from the plane, of magnificent beauty, but also of something else: “Perhaps reluctantly we come to acknowledge that there are also scars which mark the surface of our earth: erosion, deforestation, the squandering of the world’s mineral and ocean resources in order to fuel an insatiable consumption” (“Interview of the Holy Father Benedict XVI During the Flight to Australia” [12 July 2008]. Online: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080712_interview_en.html).

Like Berry, Benedict is offering an approach to the environment and to economics, one predicated on the priority of a pattern, which is ultimately a pattern of gift. The language of gratuity cannot help but strengthen the connection of these areas to Catholic sexual and life ethics, in which the category of gift already plays a central role. Indeed, the language of gift has been the preferred way beyond the (now-acknowledged) failures of the supposedly objective “physicalism” characteristic of the sexual ethics of the moral manuals. But Benedict’s use of the “gift” pattern in economy and ecology overcomes the temptation to divide life into a private realm of love (centered on marriage and having children), governed by gift, and a public realm of instrumentalized use, governed by utilitarian calculations. Berry’s writings not only name the misleading patterns that distort us, but also indicate the “way of ignorance” and of discipline which are necessary to see the real pattern.

b. Work with the patterns

But we may go on to ask, why are these oversimplified patterns so prevalent in our culture? Berry’s answer is surprisingly consistent: it is because our industrial society is held together through bad work. Approaching the pattern of creation may require us to change our minds, but it really requires us to *change the way we work*—that is, to begin to work *with* the pattern. In criticizing wilderness conservation, Berry instead claims that “conservation is good work,” by which he means conserving nature means designing productive, useful work that participates in and works with the pattern of creation. He points out two (oversimplified!) definitions of the “work” involved in “conservation”—that it simply involves somehow “managing” resources with more restraint or it involves “protecting” wilderness.³³ In place of abstract notions of conservation, and even of the abstract language of “the environment,” Berry suggests, “the real name of our connection to this everywhere different and differently named earth is ‘work.’ . . . The name of our *proper* connection to the earth is ‘good work,’ for good work

³³Berry, “Conservation is Good Work,” 28.

involves much giving of honor.”³⁴ The real environmental crisis is located in our inability to do and honor good work. Richard White, in his history of the Columbia River basin, makes this point more formally:

it is our own work that ultimately links us, for better or worse, to nature. One of the great shortcomings—intellectual and political—of modern environmentalism is its failure to grasp how human beings have historically known nature through work. Environmentalists, for all their love of nature, tend to distance humans from it. Environmentalists stress the eye over the hand, the contemplative over the active, the supposedly undisturbed over the connected. They call for human connections with nature while disparaging all those who claim to have known and appreciated nature through work and labor.³⁵

Yet, bent on consuming, we will accept bad work in the production of the materials of our everyday life, and such bad work will not only consume (rather than conserve) the environment, but also destroy us. Berry writes that typical corporate targets of environmentalists avoid the real problem: “The world is being destroyed, no doubt about it, by the greed of the rich and powerful. It is also being destroyed by popular demand. There are not enough rich and powerful people to consume the whole world; for that, the rich and powerful need the help of countless ordinary people.”³⁶ Berry describes such people in terms quite similar to Benedict’s description of the weakness and weariness of contemporary society: “People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence, and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders.”³⁷

And, we might add, they make excellent victims or instigators of a sexual culture of lazy, sloppy promiscuity. Our society’s obsession with bad, earth-destroying and soul-destroying work feeds its frenzied destructive obsession with fulfillment and gratification in the sexual realm. Here too, sexuality becomes a consumer good

³⁴Ibid., 35.

³⁵Richard White, *The Organic Machine* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), x.

³⁶Berry, “Conservation,” 32.

³⁷Berry, “The Ecological Crisis as a Crisis of Character,” in *The Unsettling of America*, 24.

(whether romantic or merely hedonistic), because we no longer have a clear idea about the productive, creative work that our sexuality is supposed to serve. Thus, we often initiate children into the realm of sexuality without giving them any good and useful work to do, work which would build temperance. Then we present visions of marriage which are also use-less, thus setting up the rejection of marriage or at least its fragility, since it rests solely on a foundation of romantic love and fulfillment. Berry states that “a family doesn’t just stay together out of sentiment. It is certainly more apt to stay together if the various members need one another or are in some practical way dependent on one another.”³⁸ The primary form of this “good work” is the work of householding, and especially the “(re)production” of children.

The importance of work, again, reminds us that trying to talk about “environmental values” or “sexual values,” as if these are merely sets of ideas, is foolish. A focus on good work is a necessary companion to the overthrowing of false patterns, since it is the practical instantiation of the world’s complexity. The centrality of good work, both “at home” and “at work,” can be seen as the practical cement that holds together Berry’s overall vision. Berry laments that “the Protestant work ethic has never been very discriminating about kinds or qualities of work or even the usefulness of work. To raise the issue of usefulness is to call for some means or standard of discrimination.”³⁹ But this has been a major, if underdeveloped, theme of Catholic social teaching. Too often, those involved with Catholic social teaching have become preoccupied with policy and political structures. However, stretching back to *Rerum novarum*, the entire tradition is founded on a concern for the situation of workers in the new economy, and the necessary characteristics of good work. Most notably, in *Laborem exercens*, Pope John Paul II laid out a vision for “humanizing” work, work that developed human subjectivity, and therefore participated in the (gift of) creating along with God. Yet, in the same encyclical, John Paul II also proposes “objective” criteria for the value of work, which include its genuine contribution to the good of the family household and society. The fact is, the weight of the tradition offers a clear

³⁸Berry, *Conversations*, 183.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 182.

voice saying that, without good work (and, we might add, without households that “work”), there can be no real justice in a society.⁴⁰ Benedict’s encyclical, interpreted through Berry’s lens, suggests that our environmental and sexual problems cannot be solved apart from good work.

But what is “good work”? Such work is not simply (and certainly not always) “satisfying” or “enjoyable” (as students are prone to think when discussing *Laborem exercens*). Nor is it merely a matter of receiving fair compensation or avoiding direct abuses. It is work “with the pattern,” work that conforms us to the pattern of creation. Berry’s most common criterion for good work is “usefulness,” a word vastly different from the technical focus on “utility.” “Usefulness stands in opposition to the frivolous,” he says, and maintains that useful work (or language) is work “that enables seeing, makes clarity.”⁴¹ What good work allows us to do is see the grammar of creation, and also of ourselves. Such work involves both humble “ignorance” and discipline. It is humble because it “is always modestly scaled.”⁴² “Past the scale of the human,” Berry writes, “our works do not liberate us—they confine us.”⁴³ On a theological level, Berry’s insistence on modest scale is tied into the necessity of recognizing limits—the limits of the land, but even more importantly, the limits of our own knowledge.⁴⁴ This sort of work involves what he most often calls “care,” but also calls “reverence” or “giving of honor.”⁴⁵ Bad work is fundamentally careless work, and careless work happens most often when carried out by persons who do not have to deal with the consequences of their carelessness.⁴⁶ Berry pays particular attention to contrasting the

⁴⁰Thus, it is evidently troubling that the central location of Catholic social teaching is in the policy arm of the USCCB and other political advocacy groups, rather than in corporate activism and Catholic business schools!

⁴¹Berry, *Conversations*, 181.

⁴²Berry, “Conservation is Good Work,” 35.

⁴³Berry, “The Body and the Earth,” in *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), 104.

⁴⁴See his very recent essay “Faustian Economics: Hell Hath No Limits,” *Harper’s* 316 (May 2008), 35–42.

⁴⁵For example, see “The Conservation of Nature and the Preservation of Humanity,” 73–74.

⁴⁶See his criticisms of higher education for producing such “administrators” in

discipline involved in good work with the sloth, irresponsibility, and convenience involved in bad work. The industrial standards of efficiency replace older standards, which had to do with “discipline,” both in terms of the use of resources and in terms of the needs of the human subject.⁴⁷ According to the overarching standard of efficiency, “Instead of asking a man what he can do well, it asks him what he can do fast and cheap.”⁴⁸ Work that is care-less is, for him, exemplified by bad farming, which ultimately not only “uses up” the earth the farmer is working, but also uses up the farmer. (By contrast, good work preserves land in use.)

c. Local communities as mediators of the patterns

But “good work”—whether in the household or the workshop—can never be a solo endeavor. The importance of preserving and cultivating local community and culture is the third practical help that Berry gives in fleshing out Benedict’s thought. The practice of the grammar of creation can never go on alone, but must be mediated, and its mediation occurs first and foremost in communities, which Berry defines as “the commonwealth and common interests, commonly understood, of people living together in a place and wishing to do so. . . . [A] locally understood interdependence of local people, local culture, local economy, and local nature.”⁴⁹

The importance of local community and culture in Berry is perhaps the most challenging (though most commonly cited) aspect of his work, because it raises suspicions of nostalgia for some pristine past.⁵⁰ What exactly is so crucial about such community? First, such

“Higher Education and Home Defense,” in *Home Economics*, 49–53.

⁴⁷Berry, “Discipline and Hope,” in *A Continuous Harmony* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 94.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁹Berry, “Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community,” in *Sex, Economy*, 119–20.

⁵⁰See, for example, several of the questions in “A Conversation with Wendell Berry,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 27 (2000): 58–86. In that conversation, Berry’s response is (repeatedly) simply to urge people to start developing or re-developing their own personal or neighborhood economies—questioning the “necessity” of various consumer goods (81) or taking back or

community provides “membership,” a word Berry confesses is “a term borrowed from St. Paul.”⁵¹ Such community makes real, in practice, claims about solidarity, belonging, and ontological relationality that are central to the Catholic tradition. But why *local* community? A key reason, which appears often in Berry’s writing, is that this kind of community forces us “to give up the idea of going to ‘a better place’ or of ‘going west’ to escape our troubles or messes.”⁵² Berry may be quintessentially American in some ways, but he abhors the American myth of mobility, since it “keeps people from learning their lessons.”⁵³ What he means here are precisely the lessons of the real pattern or grammar of the created order, which are also the ones revealed by good work. Like good work, local community requires very similar virtues, such as patience, loyalty, trust, self-restraint, and forgiveness.⁵⁴ Like good work, local community requires a humbling discipline. In its absence, our soul travels about in what William Leach, borrowing from writer J.B. Jackson, calls “the landscape of the temporary,” in which consumption is the norm. As Leach notes, “[p]eople need to feel a bond to a concrete reality larger than the self, a reality that gives deeper meaning to existence. They need to be stewards of concrete places (not the world place or planet) in which they live”⁵⁵

One environmental lesson, of course, that needs to be learned is to deal with one’s own garbage—in this case, literally deal with the day-to-day use of the natural resources of a place. It is well-known that places where people have stable commitments are likely to be preserved quite nicely. However, such places often import their energy and manufactured goods, and export their waste to other places which they are willing to destroy. Even worse are people who go from place to place, who regard a locale as merely a blank canvas for their own desires, and who are ever willing to destroy local places and local relationships to impose their desires. And far worse than these, of course, are “placeless” corporations,

shortening the distance of economic “proxies” (75).

⁵¹Berry, *Conversations*, 137.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 178.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 144.

⁵⁴Berry, “Sex, Economy,” 120–21.

⁵⁵William Leach, *Country of Exiles* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 30.

who view places only in terms of raw materials or markets to be exploited. In all these cases, mobility is what enables illusory patterns to continue.

For Berry, local community is absolutely essential to preserving the environment against these foes and their disorderliness. (And in so doing, it is always important to remember that Berry is trying to stand with the poor and oppressed of rural Kentucky and Appalachia, who have borne much destruction with little benefit.) Care and good work require different things in different places, and even more, require attention to the particularity of the place itself. He writes, "How can the best work be done? Or: How can we give the best possible care to our highly variable economic landscapes, in which no two woodlands, no two farms, and no two fields are exactly alike? . . . This will be *placed* knowledge; out of place, it is little better than ignorance; and it is learnable only at home. To speak of it will require a *placed* language, made in reference to local names, conditions, and needs."⁵⁶ This sort of located "knowledge" (which Berry contrasts with placeless "information") is required not only because of the variability of the land, but also because its carrier will inevitably be a local culture, and "[t]o have a culture, mostly the same people have to live mostly in the same place for a long time."⁵⁷ By contrast, "[l]acking an authentic local culture, a place is open to exploitation, and ultimately destruction."⁵⁸

But local community, culture, and language is also the chief point of his major essays on issues of sexuality and the family: that, just as land is misused and abused when there is no stable community to care for it, so sexuality is open to "exploitation and destruction" if there are not communities that order and shape its use. First and foremost, "to make sense of sexual issues or of sex itself, a third term, a third entity, has to intervene between private and public."⁵⁹

⁵⁶Berry, "Local Knowledge in the Age of Information," in *The Way of Ignorance*, 123.

⁵⁷"The Way of Ignorance," 57.

⁵⁸Berry, "The Work of Local Culture," in *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 166.

⁵⁹"Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community," 119. The context for this essay is the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, but many other examples could now be cited.

This third entity is a community, which, among other things, can “enforce decency without litigation” instead of our present “poor attempt to equivocate between private lusts and public emergencies.”⁶⁰ However, “the triumph of the industrial economy is the fall of community. But the fall of the community reveals how precious and how necessary community is. For when community falls, so must fall all the things that only community life can engender and protect.”⁶¹ Chief among these is sexual love, which, when taken out of its needed context, “degenerates into a stupefying and useless contest between so-called liberation and so-called morality.”⁶² Once again, we see the conflict, when abstracted, in the same terms of the useless wilderness debate between pure conservation and instrumental use. But this is in fact no contest, for “sexual energy cannot be made publicly available for commercial use—that is, prostituted—without destroying all of its communal or cultural forms.”⁶³ Berry concludes the essay with an extended reflection on freedom, suggesting that unless freedom is understood to mean the assumption of responsibilities to others, as opposed to mere license (which we should stop calling “freedom”), it simply writes checks on a moral capital which will be used up (a deep irony considering our refusal to reduce the use of fossil fuels or to pay our own national expenses).⁶⁴

Berry’s connection here is twofold. First, he makes the important claim that local cultures are required in order to *preserve* and *teach* orderly sexuality. It simply is not the kind of thing that can be done well by public abstraction (though it can be done poorly in this way), nor can it be done if the community’s customs are routinely ignored and violated by outside forces intent on portraying sexuality in destructive ways (usually because they want to sell something). No doubt parents are acutely aware of the enormous difficulties of conveying “sexual values” to their children in the

⁶⁰Ibid., 120, 123.

⁶¹Ibid., 133.

⁶²Ibid., 122.

⁶³Ibid., 134. In fact, the myth of romantic love is often a necessary commercial counterpart to the selling of pure lust, since the ever-elusive endpoint is never actually attained, thereby fueling discontent.

⁶⁴Ibid., 159.

absence of a community that shares and practices those same values. The absence of local culture is swamped by the twin forces of hormones and commercialized exaltations of sexual desire.⁶⁵

But the further connection focuses on household practice itself: marriage does not flourish as a private exchange of affection that terminates in the subjective feelings of the individuals involved. In recounting the problems with sexuality today, Berry zeroes in on “the disintegration of the household, which was the formal bond between marriage and the earth.”⁶⁶ As in the case of environmental conservation, the problem is not simply to change our attitudes towards some externality (land, marriage), but rather to find good work. “Work is the health of love. To last, love must enflesh itself in the materiality of the world—produce food, shelter, warmth or shade, surround itself with careful arts, well-made things.”⁶⁷ Fidelity, as a practical task, requires fidelity *to* something, to some work, lest it become a nominalistic fidelity to a vow or (worse) fidelity to one’s feelings. The work of the household (which of course includes sex and raising children) provides a fidelity to a certain sort of production.⁶⁸

Of course, recovering the productivity of households is extremely important for the economic teaching of the encyclical. One characteristic of modern industrial economies has been to displace traditional household work onto the market or the state. It is important here to head off a misunderstanding: “traditional household work” should not be identified with the common image of the 50s suburban housewife, surrounded by gadgets and chemicals, keeping her house furnished with the latest commodities. This is already the degradation of the household, for such work is not

⁶⁵Having said this, it is important to note that some local sexual cultures may themselves be very destructive in various ways. It is unfortunate but telling that the most decayed sexual cultures in our society often exist in the precise places (inner-city neighborhoods, exploited rural places, universities, and the entertainment culture) where “good work” is most absent!

⁶⁶“The Body and the Earth,” 124.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁸On the notion of “fidelity” in marriage and how it involves more than a “private connection between two people,” see Anne Husted Burleigh, “Wendell Berry on Marriage: Marriage in the Membership,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 34 (2007): 522–34.

productive—nor is it very interesting!⁶⁹ Properly speaking, household work revolves around much more potentially rewarding and skillful tasks, especially those of food provisioning, skilled craft, education, and elder care. Such work requires practical and *productive* local bonds, undertaken as a cooperative project involving sharing among many households. Berry often cites this in his fiction and essays in explaining how the small farming community involves much shared labor. But beyond farm examples, a neighborhood economy of sharing offers almost endless possibilities for instantiating an “economy of gratuitousness.” This gratuitousness among households rests ultimately on the preservation and sustaining of genuine community bonds of trust and interdependence.

These forms, in Berry’s work, as in the pope’s, do not involve some rejection of “business” relations. Rather, they typically involve *different* business relations, ones that go on in connection with this local spirit of sharing. Small businesses that are personal and are intelligently run not only allow for profit (on a certain scale), but also promote and support the sharing and generosity of the community itself. Thus, in this we see a concretization of Benedict’s desire to suggest that economic practices inspired by gift can and should exist alongside more traditional businesses—so long as those businesses (a) are just in the first place, and (b) recognize their interdependence with the gift economy.

Such an observation helps us understand what Benedict means when he claims, in the encyclical, to get beyond “the exclusively binary model of market-plus-state” (39). There are, in fact, all sorts of operations that go on in our world that are neither “pure” free-market operations, like multinational corporations, nor state-provided services, like federal welfare systems. Lest Berry be thought of as excessively anti-business, he writes that “there are some corporations that do not simply incorporate what I am calling the corporate mind. . . . These organizations, I believe, tend to have hometowns and to count themselves participants in the local economy and as members of the local community.”⁷⁰ While they

⁶⁹Berry defends “marriage as a state of mutual help, and the household as an economy” (180) against such misunderstandings, especially feminist misunderstandings, in “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine,” in *What Are People For?* 178–96.

⁷⁰Berry, “The Way of Ignorance,” 60.

bear certain responsibilities to both “the market” and “the state,” such corporations “account” for more than profit and law-following. Berry highlights their responsibility to a place, and that does seem important, but we might also think about any corporation that might serve fundamental goods, such as the works of mercy. Similarly, his writing evidences much more sympathy for targeted and more local government programs, ones that are much more “in place.”

The focus on real patterns, good work, and local community converges on a practical implication: one ought, so far as possible, to extricate oneself and one’s family from work and consumption that are dependent on the institutions of this large-scale economy. Unfortunately, we are sufficiently “addicted” to this economy at this point that, for many, this will be a choice that involves sacrifice. Fortunately, Berry, the pope, and many others point out the myriad of possibilities still available to shape alternative practice.⁷¹ At a basic level, most households could switch significant amounts of their food consumption to local and sustainable sources, save money by consuming fewer junk foods and preparing more meals at home (good work!), and even strengthen family and local culture by sharing more meals with others in the household. It is simply false for many people to suggest that such a move is “impossible” or “too expensive.” One couple, starting from a bare pantry, experimented and ate sustainably on the government-defined food-stamp minimum of \$248 a month for a couple—and without any mention of meal-sharing!⁷² But it does require discipline, it sacrifices conve

⁷¹The pope, for example, praises consumer and worker cooperatives as an example of the kinds of economic forms that he recommends (*CV*, 66). A large number of Americans live in proximity to strong consumer food cooperatives, and many of these are linked to farmer-owned worker cooperatives. Even commercial supermarkets carry products from producer cooperatives, like Florida’s Natural and Organic Valley. And of course many Americans have access to the ultimate form of cooperative, the CSA, in which customers buy a share in a local farmer’s farm, in exchange for a season’s worth of fresh produce. For national directories, see <http://www.localharvest.org/food-coops/>.

⁷²Siobhan Phillips, “Can We Afford to Eat Ethically?” *Salon* (25 April 2009). Online: http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2009/04/25/pinched_ethically/. The article is extremely instructive in providing some basic sources and strategies, without suggesting anything too strange (for example, they substituted organic quick oats microwaved with a dash of cinnamon and sugar for their standard

nience, and it brings changes in one's eating habits, which can no longer be dictated entirely by subjective tastes. At a very basic level, it instantiates the "grammar of creation" in concern for the very bread that sustains our lives. It requires good work (and takes time away from wasteful activities). And it ultimately relies on and strengthens local culture, insofar as neighborliness will be needed to share skills that are all too quickly being lost. This is merely one example where concrete steps could be taken. And taking steps particularly on the consumption side is important, because over time spending shifts money from large, non-gratuitousness systems (where it may be earned) into more gratuitous systems, thereby creating more production opportunities which involve "good work."

3. Objections

Critics of Berry's work may object to aligning the pope's encyclical so closely with this man. Such objections may take two forms. First, some may point to parts of Berry's work, especially on religion, and pick out claims that may be at odds with Benedict's larger theology. Addressing such a criticism would require a more comprehensive essay on Berry's religious thought, but here I would simply point out that Berry is not a Catholic, nor a systematic theologian, or even a theologian, and that the primary target in his religious essays is evidently Baptist, fundamentalist piety and its errors. It is not religion or God. For example, he frequently holds up Amish communities as an example, and when explaining their ability to survive, the first reason he cites is they are religious "at their center." They are held together "not just by various worldly necessities, but by spiritual authority." However, by contrast with most Christians who "have tended to specialize in the interests of the spirit, . . . the Amish have not secularized their earthly life. They have not hesitated to see communal and agricultural implications in their religious principles"⁷³

Cheerios breakfast). They also seem to miss the joys of bulk spices, which are much cheaper. However, the author does admit that the one "luxury" involved was time—not in the sense of more time, but in the sense of time flexibility.

⁷³Berry, "Margins," in *The Unsettling of America*, 211.

A more salient objection comes from those who question Berry's work altogether. After reading Berry for a while, it is hard to escape the vexing thought that his vision of good use can be instantiated in only one way: the small farming family, working their land, running their household, making their goods. While "unrealistic" is a notably poor critique of ethical arguments (was it "realistic" to imagine the end of slavery?), any account of morality that offers a single form of life for all must be seen as questionable, on both secular and Christian grounds.⁷⁴

The reading of Berry (and of Benedict) I would urge here is that his work points us to questions of *communal* practice rather than to questions of *individualistic* perfectionism, a tension in Berry's work that some sympathetic critics have noted. As Kimberly Smith points out, Berry's emphasis on interdependence and connection is sometimes in conflict with his logic of local self-sufficiency and independence.⁷⁵ Similarly, Eric Freyfogle notes that Berry, in his haste to correctly criticize social movements that simply blame others (e.g., corporations, the rich, the powerful) by refocusing on our individual choices, sometimes makes it seem as though "pure" individual choices can solve problems which are in fact larger than the individual.⁷⁶ In fact, there seems no way around one consequence of Berry's argument, that there ought to be more small farmers, more artisans, and more local tradesmen and women, and there ought to be more work done in the home.⁷⁷ However, the

⁷⁴A critique of Berry along these lines is given by Richard White, characterizing Berry as a proponent of "a modern romanticism of place" who offers approval only to "archaic work" and is thus "oblivious to the realities of the modern world." While White does mention that such ecological valorization of archaic labor "doesn't hold up to historical scrutiny," his own previously-cited history of salmon and dams on the Columbia River seems to demonstrate the opposite. See "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living? Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 181.

⁷⁵Kimberly K. Smith, "Wendell Berry's Political Vision," in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, ed. Jason Peters (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 57.

⁷⁶Eric T. Freyfogle, "Wendell Berry and the Limits of Populism," in *Wendell Berry: Life and Work*, 187.

⁷⁷As Berry notes in a recent essay, the recognition that is dawning on many that we need better farm and forest work, more "good use," more "diversified small-

vision here, if it is not to be distorted by an individualistic ethos, must be on how to build, sustain, and participate in *social networks* of good work, not simply on how to live an *individual* life maximally conformed to perfect work.

This sort of reading is, I think, emphasized if we keep in mind the eschatologically social vision characteristic of Benedict's theology. If we come to ethical questions, of whatever sort, with a picture of salvation that simply involves an individualistic perfectionism rather than communal participation, our answers to such questions will be distorted. The distortion comes in two ways. First, we will inevitably impose the sorts of false patterns Berry and Benedict insist must be rejected. Contraception, for example, will become a matter of individual self-control, or it will appear (as, unfortunately, it does to most contemporary Catholics) as a frustrating taboo, because we fail to see how contraceptive use and a contraceptive mentality infects entire social orders. Second, we will tend to ignore questions that seem unanswerable on a purely individual level—that is, questions about work and about local communities, which inevitably involve cooperation with others (if we are not simply escaping to a commune). Read on the individual level, much of Catholic social thought—for example, Benedict's "gift economy"—will simply be ignored as impossibly utopian. The universality of Catholic eschatology, of Catholic hope, must remain in view if Catholic practice is not to degenerate into an arrogant sectarianism or comforting personal therapy. Such a vision of the whole, if it is not to be some magically invisible kingdom, involves the kind of humble and humbling participation that is so characteristic of Berry's distinct vision.

In this essay, I have sought to provide key ways in which Benedict's message about the connections among all areas of the Catholic moral vision may be seen more clearly in the contemporary American context (where such connections are often not seen). A colleague of mine wondered out loud if *Caritas in veritate* represented "the Wendell Berry moment for American Catholicism."⁷⁸ My

scale land economies," "is clear and comfortable enough, until we recognize the question we have come to: Where are the people?" See "In Distrust of Movements," in *Citizenship Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 47.

⁷⁸In fairness, historically there are significant American Catholic voices that have

explanations, using the work of Wendell Berry, illustrate why such connections are sometimes *not* seen, but at the same time point a way forward to the sorts of social practices necessary to see them. In particular, the proclamation of a true grammar of creation, the insistence on good work in harmony with this grammar, and the preservation and enhancement of local communities in which the grammar is learned and refined will allow the possibilities of “an economy of grace” to be seen and lived out. Without these, all too many interpretations of the encyclical will fail to understand its fullness, and will instead cherry-pick the parts of the encyclical that support their already-existing agenda of ignorant oversimplifications. In cherry-picking like this, readers ultimately display a lack of discipline in attending to the arduous task of changing their own lives. □

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tried to articulate an alternative to the present economy. For example, see “The Bishops’ Program of Social Reconstruction” (1920), which proposes a remarkably far-sighted plan, including “the establishment of cooperative stores,” which is “no Utopian scheme,” since “it has been successfully carried out in England and Scotland through the Rochdale system,” but which has not attained much success here “because we have been too impatient and too individualistic to make the necessary sacrifices and to be content with moderate benefits and gradual progress” (339). This document (325–48) and others are found in *American Catholic Thought on Social Questions*, ed. Aaron I. Abell (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).