

“Mercy, Truth and Genesis 1:26: God’s Plan for Human Flourishing”

Theology of the Body Conference

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Introduction

It is good that we come together to reflect on the Theology of the Body, and probe the depths of this wisdom which is such a great gift to the Church that St. John Paul II has bequeathed us. It holds out to us that “new language” to express the wisdom of the Church’s timeless teachings that the Synod fathers asked for at the last two Synods on the family. Still, it is a language that has to be learned.

The teachings of the Theology of the Body came, as you know, from the catechesis that John Paul gave at his Wednesday General Audiences from September of 1979 to November of 1984. I was a seminarian in Rome at the time, and I remember when he was giving those talks. And I remember the controversy that it caused and the harsh criticism he was subject to for some of the things he said, especially when he spoke about how married couples can sin against the Sixth Commandment even within their marital relationship. He received intense criticism for that. I kind of doubt that the people who criticized him really understood what he was talking about, or perhaps even *tried* to understand what he was he was talking about.

In the last analysis, such criticisms are indicative of the loss of society’s understanding of God’s vision for human flourishing. I think all of us here have the earnest desire to reclaim this vision for our culture. To do so, though, we really have to go back to the beginning, i.e., the very beginning, as in, Genesis chapter 1, and specifically, that most foundational verse in Sacred Scripture, Genesis 1:26: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’”

This, in a nutshell, captures the whole vision. The next three verses elaborate upon it:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’ And God said, ‘Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.’

So this is the state of things at the conclusion of God’s work of creation: the plan for our human flourishing is laid out quite clearly. As we know, though, the story doesn’t end there. Two chapters later we encounter the fall of our first parents. Now, everything goes haywire, suffering and death enter into the picture. But right at that moment, at the very moment of our downfall, God promises to get us out of it. He comes up with a plan to do this, and takes a real long time to work it out – from our perspective, anyway, but God’s timing is always perfect. But while God restores us to the life He intended for us in the next world through His Son Jesus Christ, while still in this world we continue to suffer the effects of original sin. And the more we get away from living God’s plan here and now as He originally designed it, the more we will suffer those ill effects. That is what we are facing nowadays. So, let’s try to look a little closer at this plan.

Understanding of the Human Person

Basically, what we see is a two-pronged plan: “male and female He created them”, and, “let them have dominion ... over all the earth.” And notice how, right after He creates the man and the woman, He gives them a two-fold commandment, reflecting His two-pronged plan: “Be fruitful and multiply,” and, “fill the earth and subdue it.” Basically, God is telling us how we are to live with regard to our relationships to one another and our relationship to material creation. The idea is that God has put us here in this world as stewards of His creation.

Think about what a steward is, an image that appears in some of our Lord’s parables as recounted in the Gospel of St. Luke. The steward is a servant, but a very specific kind of a servant: the servant to whom the master entrusts the administration of his goods. So the steward administers goods, but they are not his own, they belong to the master. And the master expects the steward to administer them in a responsible way, in a way that will grant him an increase. We are servants of God, then, in this sense of a steward: everything we have is a gift from God, all of the material and spiritual blessings He has given us. Even if you worked hard to earn what you have, it is because you used wisely the gifts of intelligence and good health that God gave you. All that we have, then, really belongs to God, and God expects us to use these gifts in accordance with His will, for His purposes, so that He may receive an increase: that is, the spreading of His love and our growth in holiness, so that we may be happy with Him now and forever in heaven.

The original idea here, as Scripture describes it to us, is one of harmony: all of creation is in harmonious relationship, and man is an integral part of it, indeed, the highest expression of it. The man and the woman live in a relationship of harmonious complementarity with each other and exercise their dominion over all the earth.

The human person, then, is in integral being – both body and soul, both intellect and will, and so forth. What we see going on today, though, is a breakdown of this understanding. Instead, the various dimensions of the human person are seen as kind of separate silos, such that a sort of “compartmentalization” happens – for example, the strict separation of one’s public life from one’s private life; or the idea, certainly very popular nowadays, that one can be “spiritual” without this having any implications on how one uses one’s body.

This is a point that Pope Benedict XVI elaborated upon in his encyclical on Catholic Social Teaching, *Caritas in Veritate*. He speaks there about the intimate and unbreakable relationship between the proper moral outlook of society and its ability to respect human nature. He writes,

In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. 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. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society [CV, 51].

Pope Francis has continued and expanded upon this teaching of Pope Benedict, especially in his landmark Encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si’*. All throughout this document he

emphasizes the interconnectedness of all of life, i.e., the vision of Genesis chapter 1. At one point he picks up on the passage I just cited from *Caritas in Veritate*, underscoring how important it is for us to take a holistic approach when addressing the environment:

My predecessor Benedict XVI ... observed that ... 'the deterioration of nature is closely connected to the culture which shapes human coexistence'. Pope Benedict asked us to recognize that the natural environment has been gravely damaged by our irresponsible behaviour. The social environment has also suffered damage. Both are ultimately due to the same evil: the notion that there are no indisputable truths to guide our lives, and hence human freedom is limitless. We have forgotten that 'man is not only a freedom which he creates for himself. Man does not create himself. He is spirit and will, but also nature'. With paternal concern, Benedict urged us to realize that creation is harmed 'where we ourselves have the final word, where everything is simply our property and we use it for ourselves alone. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher instance than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves' [LS, 6].

The point he is making here looks to that second commandment at the beginning: the care we are to have for all of creation, subduing the earth. But because the human person is an integral whole, any one dimension of our existence affects all of the others – the physical, the spiritual, the emotional, the social, the moral, etc. all affecting and influencing each other. Our response to the second commandment, then, will necessarily have consequences with regard to the first commandment, the one having to do with the stewardship of our bodies. This is why Pope Francis can also say the following in his Encyclical on the physical environment:

Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment.... It is enough 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, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek 'to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it' [LS, 155].

This brings us back, then, to the two-pronged plan with its corresponding two-fold commandment. The two are intimately inter-related. I really believe that so many of the woes we are experiencing in our society today are due precisely to the corruption and confusion in these areas of life. But the Church, with her Biblical wisdom and ever-deepening insights into God's truth contained therein, gives us a response to this problem. And we see the start right here: keeping in mind these beginning principles, we can see that the answer involves ordering our society according to this hierarchy of values, that is, the just and correct ordering of society. It has to be ordered in that way if we are to attain authentic development and enduring justice, that is, our true human flourishing and, ultimately, what God wants for us: happiness with Him now and forever in heaven.

The beginning principles concern what is most deeply intimate about us. Those are the values that have to be placed at the top of the hierarchy, then, precisely because of the direct and dramatic effect they have on everything else.

The Command to be Fruitful

We are all alarmed at the breakdown of this vision in our society, and of society's resolve to try to conform its ordering toward it, which is wreaking all kinds of havoc and causing untold suffering for so many. We see all around us the consequences of this demise of our understanding of the correct ordering of society and of the human person. We see it, for example, in attacks on the sanctity of human life in all kinds of ways, even against the most innocent. We see its effects in the erosion of the meaning of marriage in its most basic sense: the life-long union between a man and a woman of mutual and exclusive fidelity for the purposes of the procreation and education of children and the mutual good of the spouses. We see it in the rampant devastating effects of fatherlessness, corroborated by reams of documentation from social science research over the last several decades. Indeed, this has been happening for decades in our society. How did we get here?

Well, you all have studied Theology of the Body already, so you know: we got here by separating the procreative end of conjugal love from its unitive end. Clearly, by its very nature, by just looking at the physical act, that is what conjugal love is for: procreation and unity. This is how the human body is designed, and because the human person is an integral whole, our entire being is designed this way, that is, for communion. You might call this the "holistic approach." These are the two ends of marriage, and also why conjugal love in its true meaning – the comprehensive union of two persons at every level, whereby the two become one flesh – is only possible in marriage.

This separation of the two ends of marriage is possible only when the human person is no longer seen holistically but rather in a compartmentalized way, and it eventually results in the two ends being separated from marriage itself. This is often referred to as the "contraceptive mentality," a mentality that separates the procreative purpose out from the sexual act. So it reduces the sexual act to something that is done simply for pleasure. Thus, its proper place is no longer exclusively within marriage, and all means are allowable for avoiding pregnancy and the consequences of an undesired pregnancy.

The problem is that people do not understand what love means anymore. Love is understood nowadays in a purely subjective sense. Therefore, people cannot understand – even fundamentally – what marriage is about. This was already emphasized by Pope Pius XII, back in the years after the Second World War, who realized back then how contemporary culture was eroding these values. And it was repeated again in *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council.

When we think about the deep, full meaning of why God created them "male and female," namely, that He put into place this sexual difference and complementarity not only to make possible the conjugal union which contributes so much to individual and societal flourishing, but even more so to be the privileged sign of His union with His people, we can perhaps begin to get a sense of what a deep offense it is to God that we would use such a precious gift for our own selfish purposes. It is what Pope Benedict referred to as the "banalization of sexuality" in the book-length interview he did several years ago with Peter Sewald, *Salt of the Earth*. He says there that we have to re-humanize our understanding of sexuality. Indeed, when we come up with our own idea and do things our own way apart from God's plan, we mess it all up every time. We keep going back to the Garden of Eden *after* the fall.

God's plan, of course, is that our sexualized nature is to make possible a total gift of ourselves (as you know, a favorite phrase of St. John Paul) so that we may become holy. This is the purpose of our vocation, exemplified most clearly in the vocation of marriage: to be school of self-

perfection, so that we may attain holiness of life. But how does that become possible? How does an individual grow into a person capable of that kind of love? The obvious answer, as challenging as it is in the times in which we are living, is chastity. Today's world sees this as a negative, as a deprivation, as a suppression of the sexual appetite. I suppose in a certain sense that is a part of it, but there's so much more to it than that.

Chastity, essentially, means living in a way that affirms the value of the person in every situation and at all times. As John Paul says in his book *Love and Responsibility* which he wrote when he was the Archbishop of Krakow and really is the blueprint of what became his Theology of the Body, chastity raises "to the personal level all reactions to the value of 'the body and sex'." As he says, it is a spiritual disposition which cannot be achieved without spiritual effort and, ultimately, exists for the sake of happiness. Its function is "to free love from utilitarian attitudes" which lie deep within the soul. And he has this very provocative image of how these tendencies are "hatched" deep within the soul, and how we must dig in there deeply and root them out. Chastity, then, only makes sense in association with the virtue of love, according to the true meaning of what love is. And not love in the sense of looking to the future. When we encourage our young people to be chaste, it's not simply a matter of abstaining until marriage and then after marriage they can have at it as they wish. That, again, stays at the level of using another person to fulfill one's own desire. Rather, it means forming our young people to be persons capable of loving, here and now, according to what love really means. We must, then, use reason to deal with our emotions in a healthy way. If we don't, love will never mature to the level of where it needs to go.

And we know how urgent it is to get this message out to our young people. They get so much misinformation and distortions in this world in which we're living. They have for a long time. I remember a good example of this from a long time ago – I think this was back in the 1980's. It was one of those moments when I just needed some mindless entertainment, so I did something that I very rarely do: I turned on the television, and started channel surfing. I happened upon a program in which – alarming, but not surprising – people were having a very provocative discussion about teen sex. They had, of course, only one person from the side representing our way of thinking, a genius of a woman who worked for U.S. Bishops' Conference at the time. I still remember this teenage girl, when it came to questions, standing up and, with a very defiant attitude, asking her, "You think we're just animals, that we can't think for ourselves. Why do you treat us like animals?" I don't remember exactly the answer she gave. I know it was a good answer, I'm sure she assured the young lady that, no, we don't think they're animals. But I wish I could have been there to whisper the answer into her ear. Because what I would've said is: "Let's think about that. What makes human beings different from animals? Human beings have the power to reason, animals don't. Animals can only react according to an urge or an impulse. They can't inform their actions with reason and therefore make a decision. We believe that human beings have reason, so we're not bound just to react according to an impulse, according to the urge of an emotion at the moment. We can inform our actions with reason, inform our emotions with reason, and make a decision that is wise and healthy. So that's the difference. Now think about those people over there. What are they telling you, and all of us? They're saying, 'They're going to do it anyway, so we have to tell them to take precautions.' They're saying that you're helpless in reacting to this urge that you feel. We're saying, 'No, you are human beings. You have reason. You can inform your decisions with reason and so make a responsible, healthy decision, not based purely on emotional stimulation.' So who, really, are the ones who think you are animals and are treating you as such?" You see the difference.

This is a message our young women especially need to understand, because in the situation of promiscuity, it's inevitably the woman who ends up more deeply wounded. Young women need to appreciate how awesome is the gift that God has given them, the gift to conceive a new human life right within their body – a human life with an immortal soul. What an awesome gift! They have to appreciate this gift and understand how sad it is to misuse it. They should never throw away this greatest gift just to give some boy a fleeting thrill. And even if it's a thrill for her, even if she thinks she's in love, still, it's a lowering of who we are called to be. It is really using another person and allowing one's self to be used. Chastity is what makes love possible. Our young

people need to understand this for the sake of their own happiness. Without it they will never be happy. Everything tells them otherwise, but they must be disabused of this myth so they don't have to learn the hard way.

This situation of using another person in order to satisfy one's primal desires is obviously what's happening in an extramarital situation. But even married couples can live this way within their marital relationship. They can even be unchaste towards each other. This was the point that Pope John Paul was making in the talk he gave at that General Audience. What he was saying was that, when the contraceptive mentality is introduced into the picture, the relationship inevitably slides off in that direction, the direction of the married couple using each other as a means to the end of satisfying their desire. This was his great insight, that contraception not only frustrates the procreative end of marriage but the unitive end as well, because with it marriage can never be that school of self-perfection that it is meant to be. The marriage will never be all that it's called to be. Now this may seem like a bold statement but, in my mind, there's no doubt that this is at the heart – at least, one of the primary factors at the heart – of so many of the social ills we are experiencing nowadays in our society.

The first commandment at the outset of creation, then, calls us to a spirituality of stewardship of our bodies, of recognizing our bodies, our very sexuality, as a gift from God to be used for His purposes because His purposes are for our greatest good, and lead to our human flourishing. We are stewards of these gifts, and it is the virtue of chastity which enables us to steward them wisely, well, and in accordance with God's plan.

The Command to Subdue the Earth

What about the second commandment, though, the commandment to subdue the earth? If we can understand chastity as the spirituality of stewardship of our bodies, then we can understand our call to stewardship of the earth as the spirituality of chastity with regard to the passing material things of this world, that is, accepting them as gifts from God and using them for His purposes because His purposes are, again, for our greatest good.

In their pastoral letter issued back in the 1990's, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, the U.S. bishops teach that the world "remains a kind of garden or workshop entrusted to the care of men and women for God's glory and the service of humankind." We have here, then, the beginning of the Christian vocation: to collaborate with God in the work of creation – the first chapter of Genesis – and in the work of redemption – the third chapter of Genesis, the fall and then the promise of redemption. Stewardship, then, sees all of creation as a gift. The Christian vocation is fulfilled by returning to God, with increase, all that He has given us.

As *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* says,

All temporal and spiritual goods are created by and come from God. That is true of everything human beings have: spiritual gifts like faith, hope and love; talents of body and brain; cherished relationships with family and friends; material goods; the achievements of human genius and skill, the world itself. One day God will require an accounting of the use each person has made of the particular portion of these goods entrusted to him or her.

If marriage is a school of self-perfection in which the man and the woman accept their sexuality as a gift from God and live it out accordingly, then our stewardship of the earth is, likewise, a school of self-perfection with regard to our relationship to the passing material things of this world, using them in a way that has consequences for our eternity, as gifts from God to be used for His glory and to help us work out our salvation.

In his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis uses that very beautiful phrase in reference to the earth which is so evocative of our Christian understanding: "our common home." The Christian

perspective places the primacy on the spiritual: cognizant of the truth that our natural and physical environment is God's creation and expression of His love for us, and His gift to us as our home in which we seek our salvation, the Church exhorts us to be good and respectful stewards of our environment. But the emphasis on the spiritual is not to the diminishment of the physical. Indeed, the Church proposes that there is a covenant between us and our physical world. Only the "silo mentality" would separate these out and oppose them to each other. On the contrary, the very word for "house" in the Greek language indicates how antithetical that would be to the Christian vision. The Greek word "oikos" is the root of three very important English words: ecology, economy, and ecumenism. The Holy Father weaves together the need to respond to the environmental crisis, the economic inequities that create an ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and the underlying spiritual hunger felt by so many today. The goods of the earth are not meant for us to exploit for our own selfish gain, but to contribute to the common good and, with God's help, build a world more in conformity with His plan for our flourishing.

Now, when you hear the word "stewardship" you may think immediately of time, talent and treasure. We often point to these because they are gifts that God has given, to some degree, to everyone. They are very concrete realities and therefore easy to measure. Stewardship certainly is not confined to these gifts, but our use of them has a very incisive impact on how we live day-to-day, and we will feel the difference when we are generous with them.

All of this places demands on us. *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response* speaks about the concept of cheap grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer articulated in his classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He, of course, was the Lutheran pastor involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler and was caught and eventually executed for it, so he knew what costly grace is. "Costly grace is costly," the bishops tell us, "because it requires a disciple for Jesus' sake to put aside the craving for domination, possession, and control, and grace because it confers true liberation and eternal life. It is costly, finally, because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner." This is the imitation of Christ in his self-emptying. As the bishops say,

To be a Christian disciple is a rewarding way of life, a way of companionship with Jesus, and the practice of stewardship as a part of it is itself a source of deep joy. Those who live this way are happy people who have found the meaning and purpose of living.

They are happy because they are grateful. Stewardship essentially is a spirituality of gratitude. How can one cooperate with God's gifts if one is not grateful for them? Without gratitude, happiness is impossible. Or, as one wise bishop I once worked with put it, "Gratitude is the attitude of beatitude." That pretty much sums up what stewardship means. And it's not that we have to put up with these hardships to be generous and therefore be miserable here in this life so that we can be happy in the hereafter. It doesn't work that way. That happiness begins already here and now, because living this way creates within us the capacity for heaven because it creates within us the capacity for love. Does that sound like what I said about chastity? Same thing with regard to the material things of this world – to use them in a way that has positive consequences for our eternity, to use them in a way that makes us capable of love and therefore capable of Heaven.

This is certainly not a message we hear out in the world. That message, so often, is directly contrary to the way God has created us to live. The message we most often hear is that the purpose of life is to live for me – "It's all for me!" – not for others. As the bishops say in their pastoral letter, "In some ways it may be harder to be a Christian steward today than at times in the past. ... our country's secular dominant culture often contradicts the value of Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is a culture in which destructive 'isms' – materialism, relativism, hedonism, individualism, consumerism – exercise seductive, powerful influences."

Mercy and Truth

I find it ironic that all of these message of “our country’s secular dominant culture” are meant to convince us that this is how we will find happiness in life. And far too many people are falling for it! In reality, it brings misery, and this is really bad news. On the other hand, as Pope Francis says in his recent Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, “The Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed.” The Christian understanding of the family, marriage, and the human person is indeed good news precisely because it stands in stark contrast to the view held by many today according to which we are fundamentally alone in life, and that society is somehow held together largely by a collection of individual rights. This is the misery of the false promises, because they lead ultimately to loneliness, the greatest suffering. Or, as St. Teresa of Calcutta put it, particularly in the West “loneliness ... is the greatest poverty.”

However, God’s mercy is infinite, and as St. John Paul says in his second Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, “on the part of man only a lack of good will can limit [God’s mercy], a lack of readiness to be converted and to repent, in other words persistence in obstinacy, opposing grace and truth.” This is why “in no passage of the Gospel message does forgiveness, or mercy as its source, mean indulgence towards evil, towards scandals, towards injury or insult” (DM, 14).

This is important for us to bear in mind, especially during this Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. That is, mercy and truth cannot be separated if human beings are to flourish. It is not merciful to indulge someone in types of behavior that will only result, eventually, in harm to themselves (and perhaps others, too). There is no genuine mercy without truth. So the problem lies on the spiritual level, not the behavioral.

Being involved in educational efforts on Theology of the Body yourselves, I’m sure many of you have encountered young people who, when they are taught these truths and come to understand them, a big light comes on in their head and they typically say, “Why didn’t someone teach me this before? It would have saved me so much heartache.” The greatest act of mercy we can extend to someone is to guide them in the way of truth and support them in trying to live according to it, for, as our Lord assures us in the Gospel of St. John, it is the truth that will set us free (Jn 8:32).

Faithful response to God’s commandments in the act of creation surely means nothing more than living an integral Christian life. This is living according to the way God made us, and to do so is ever more challenging in the world in which we live.

As the U.S. bishops explain in *Stewardship: A Disciple’s Response*, the contemporary culture has become adverse to the Judaeo-Christian values on which it was originally founded, and “Christians are part of this culture, influenced by it in many ways.” That means us. If we are to spread God’s mercy and truth, then we ourselves will have to dig deep down into our souls where these influences are “hatched” and root them out. This is the work of ongoing conversion, of participating with Christ in his self-emptying, embracing the cross. And the deeper we dig and the more intimate we seek to unite ourselves with him, the more costly will that death to self be.

But, it is worth it. The dehumanizing trends of contemporary society destroy human dignity. We are called to destroy, not our dignity or another’s dignity, but destroy our sinfulness and our selfishness. This is the way to attain our basic human vocation which is happiness with God. And this is how we can reclaim a society that seeks to conform itself to God’s plan for our flourishing – in its cultural values, in its institutions, in the ideals it sets for its citizens and the priorities it promotes. Yes, this is all ultimately for our happiness, the only path to true and eternal happiness.

To cite just one example, listen to this testimony of a married couple:

[A]fter twelve years of marriage, we are grateful for the people who have challenged us from the beginning to embrace fully Christ’s teachings. They weren’t always telling us the things we wanted to hear, but we feel blessed that

we were able to work through the initial frustrations of committing ... to the Church. It's difficult to separate ourselves from the demands ... of the world, but there's a tremendous amount of peace that comes from every decision we make for Christ and his will for us. We can't overstate the powerful impact the lifestyle has had on our marriage and three children.

What lifestyle do you think they were referring to: the first commandment having to do with stewardship of our bodies, or the second commandment about stewardship of the material things of this world (specifically, time, talent and treasure)? It's hard to tell, isn't it?

This quotation comes from *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*. I omitted the few words in this quote that would have tipped you off that they were speaking about stewardship of material possessions. To cite completely what they said: "As our concept of stewardship continues to evolve after twelve years of marriage, we are grateful for the people who have challenged us"; "we feel blessed that we were able to work through the initial frustrations of committing *the best portion of our time, talent and treasure* to the Church"; and, "It's difficult to separate ourselves from the demands *and possessions* of the world."

You see then how, at its root, this is the same spirituality, with the same challenges: living the way God created us to be – "give, give, give" and "other, other, other" – in a world that persistently shouts at us, "take, take, take" and "me, me, me."

Conclusion

Just let me conclude with this thought. The timeless wisdom the Church has to offer us, in light of the social and political trends we are facing today, is precisely what we need to respond to the challenges of our time. We need this wisdom: that is, we need to retain it, cherish it, learn it and promote it, not reject it.

This wisdom is timeless, teaching us perennial truth applicable to every age, although in each particular age it will take its own particular twists and turns. Our own age is one of increasing isolation, consequently marred by desperate and senseless acts of violence. Living the perennial truth already present at the outset of creation means for us putting the focus on the call to community, which is only possible through the gift of self lived out in our bodies and with cheerful generosity of the blessings God has lavished upon us. This is authentic Christian living in the contemporary world.

To put it succinctly: we live in an age whose theme song is, "I Did It My Way." As Christians in this age we are called, instead, to build a "We Did It God's Way" world.