

# Go and Do Likewise (V): Grateful Children

The accounts of creation in Genesis introduce man's three most fundamental relationships: with God, with his neighbour, and with the earth. The Church invites Christians to take these as a starting point in shaping society, caring for creation, and contributing to the common good.

## The creator's design

The beginning of the Book of Genesis highlights God's universal and unlimited power: only He has absolute dominion over all things and exercises it to give rise to life. In the context of creation, God entrusts the first human couple, created in His image and likeness, with the task of subduing the earth and having dominion over every living creature (cf. *Gen 1:26-29*). The Hebrew word "image" used in the text meant statue, sculpture, or representation, and it also referred to the images of gods that presided over temples (cf. *Ez 7:20; 16:17; 2 Kings 11:18; Num 33:52*). Similarly, just as kings of the time erected images of themselves to mark their dominion in distant lands, Adam was placed on earth as the image of God and representative of his sovereignty.

In the second account, Adam is given the task of naming the animals.

Naming something implies subjecting the named object to an order that determines, in a certain sense, the place it should occupy in the world. Adam participates in God's divine authority and has been designated his representative on earth, governing in the name of the divine sovereign. God, in turn, accepts the names Adam gives his creatures. Thus, man exercises dominion over creation, and this exercise of dominion means that the destiny of the cosmos is linked to human freedom, by the creator's design.

The creation story and the fact the man's dominion depends *on* and participates *in* God's may seem like random trivia, unimportant in a Christian's everyday life. But "in Israel's profession of faith, to affirm that God is Creator does not mean

merely expressing a theoretical conviction, but also grasping the original extent of the Lord's gratuitous and merciful action on behalf of man. In fact, God freely confers being and life on everything that exists.”<sup>[1]</sup> The principle of the divine creation of all things, manifested many times in Sacred Scripture (especially in the Book of Genesis) provides us with a key to understanding reality and acting accordingly: we live in constant gratitude, stemming from the gratuitousness of God's love.

### **“I thank you, Father”**

Gratitude consists of the disposition of the will to recognize and reciprocate a received good. Beyond feelings of appreciation or acknowledgment, it means a practical response in words or actions. Therefore, gratitude entails a perspective capable of recognizing

the benefit received and, at the same time, actions expressing that recognition.

The Gospel shows us several people who showed Jesus kindness, from those who cared for his family in Bethlehem (the shepherds and the magi) to those who eased his burden on Calvary (Simon of Cyrene, the good thief, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the women accompanying Mary...). Each of them received a grateful look, smile, or words of appreciation from our Lord.

The "thank you" that resonates most powerfully in the Gospel is the one Jesus addressed to his Father: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (*Mt 11:25*). The "things" Jesus refers to are the knowledge of

God and the world, and He teaches them to us. The wisdom of God is accessible to everyone. The “little ones,” people who view the world simply and without prejudice, know that they have received everyone from God, and they understand it more easily.

## **Grateful eyes and hearts**

As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* reminds us, “the attitude that must characterize the way man acts in relation to creation is essentially one of gratitude and appreciation; the world, in fact, reveals the mystery of God who created and sustains it. [...] The world presents itself before man's eyes as evidence of God, the place where his creative, providential and redemptive power unfolds.”<sup>[2]</sup>

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Christian actions are rooted in a thankful acceptance of God's gifts

because of our faith in creation and grateful outlook. We are free, and each person can choose to reject or accept God's power, to deny his dominion or to worship Him and see reality as a gift. The first approach considers created things as objects to be manipulated and possessed arbitrarily, while the second receives, admires, understands, enjoys, and shares them. Above all, the second approach refers things back to God because they come from Him. Every human decision, no matter how minute or seemingly irrelevant, ultimately involves the rejection or grateful acceptance of God's gifts.

We could refer to any number of everyday examples: celebrating a special occasion with family and friends, achieving a professional milestone, experiencing something new, sharing a talent... All of reality, including the material universe and

our relationships with others, is a divine gift.

The grateful acceptance of these gifts is seen in a special way when we accept and welcome others as gifts: “Made in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26), and made visible in the universe in order to live in society (cf. *Gen* 2:20,23) and exercise dominion over the earth (cf. *Gen* 1:26,28- 30), the human person is for this reason called from the very beginning to life in society: ‘God did not create man as a *solitary being* but wished him to be a *social being*. Social life therefore is not exterior to man: he can only grow and realize his vocation in relation with others.”<sup>[3]</sup> When we gratefully accept others, we necessarily also care for them, which – among other things – means trying to contribute to the common good.

## Welcome others as gifts: an invitation to the common good

Pope Francis reminds us that integral ecology – a concept closely related to the care of creation, understood not only as the natural world, but also human society – is essential to the common good. This principle plays a central and unifying role in social ethics. Our dedication to preserving and caring for creation will be more genuine if it is directed toward building up the common good, which is “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily,”<sup>[4]</sup> or, in other words, integral and sustainable human development.

As Christians, when we see other people in need or notice problems in our community, we should feel the urge to respond. We are called to be

responsible and generous, to genuinely seek the good of all people. The ideal of the common good is not a vague abstraction: it is a call for everyone in society to look beyond their own interests and collaborate according to their personal abilities. This means seeing past what would be “good for me” alone to a horizon lit up by charity, through openness to others and a desire to harmonize the various dimensions (familial, social, political, cultural, technical, etc.) of our complex society.

Underlying this perspective is the awareness of the infinite dignity of every human person, whatever their circumstances. The order of things must be subordinated to the order of persons and not the other way around, as Jesus implied when He said that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath (cf. *Mk* 2:27). This order, founded on truth and animated by charity, outlines the

primary goal of the common good: a society that seeks to serve human beings at all levels.

One manifestation of this challenge can be seen in the impact of technology. We cannot ignore the signs of the times: social relationships are increasingly complex, due to the ease and speed of communication and transportation (to give just two examples) and the new lifestyles and forms of interpersonal contact they bring with them. Technological changes are somewhat ambiguous, because general progress can go hand-in-hand with potential risks to human dignity and development. Innovations can lead to solidarity and positive social initiatives or tragic conflicts and division, depending on how they are used. They can help people reconnect or create more superficial relationships; lead to learning or addiction;

facilitate exploitation or opportunities for development. Welcoming creation in this context means safeguarding respect for the person *as such*, in both ends and means, and being guided by ethical principles rather than mere efficiency.

## **Building the common good in communion**

Each of us must take on our share of the common good, contributing what we are called to do in this world; something only we can offer, for no one can replace us in this task. This attitude is in opposition to passivity, indifference, and individualism, because it involves a continuous commitment and willingness to engage in the effort to foster an environment of communion. It means broadening our focus to something greater than our personal well-being. “It is one thing to feel

forced to live together, but something entirely different to value the richness and beauty of the seeds of common life needing to be sought out and cultivated.”<sup>[5]</sup> —

The common good is brought about in action, through the everyday activities of each citizen. The state of society depends on our personal relationships and work, which can either contribute to or take away from a healthy social and legal order. (This includes but is not limited to basic human rights, like food, housing, and transportation.) For this reason, we want to do our daily work excellently, competently and with passion. This means understanding the world, making an effort to stay informed and to be aware of the reality around us, avoiding the trap of complacent resignation under the pretext that our actions are too small to have an impact. Christ tells us his judgment will be based on small

actions done for ordinary people: “Whatever you do for the least of these...” (cf. *Mt 25:31-46*).

Moreover, the Church's magisterium has always highlighted the need for Christians to participate in and take responsibility for public life: God calls us there. The realization that our capacity is limited should lead us to combine forces and work with others to build the common good in communion. Jesus gives us the example of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk 10:25-37*), who, through his actions, made us realize that “each and everyone's existence is deeply tied to that of others: life is not time merely passing by, life is about interactions.”<sup>[6]</sup>

All of these things come together to form what we could call the “intrinsic dimension” of the common good: living well in community. It is not enough to do good *for* others; we

must also try to do good *with* others. Solidarity is bigger than taking responsibility for our part in a particular project. It leads to the desire to be with others and to work with them to achieve their goals. The common good is not only about our external condition as a society, because we build up our personal and social good through relationships.

## **The sum of many little things**

Simply being together is already good, because we can rely on the support we receive from one another to face our shortcomings and mistakes. When a community unites in the face of a natural disaster, for example, to help save people and their surroundings, despite pain, suffering, or fatigue, there is an inner fullness from having done good together and a deep shared gratitude.

The challenge is to achieve that same intensity in everyday life.

Although we have all experienced the relief of mutual support in a community, we often default to resolving things on our own or asking for and offering assistance while keeping track of how much we owe or are owed. The intrinsic common good, however, is built on the logic of gratuitous generosity when it comes to relationships, mercy, and communion. “We have the space we need for co-responsibility in creating and putting into place new processes and changes. Let us take an active part in renewing and supporting our troubled societies. Today we have a great opportunity to express our innate sense of fraternity, to be Good Samaritans who bear the pain of other people’s troubles rather than fomenting greater hatred and resentment. Like the chance traveller

in the parable, we need only have a pure and simple desire to be a people, a community, constant and tireless in the effort to include, integrate and lift up the fallen. [...] Let us foster what is good and place ourselves at its service.”<sup>[7]</sup>

Gratuitousness and gratitude go hand in hand: they guide our relationship with others, grounding it in our relationship with God, as grateful, responsible children.

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The book of Genesis reveals that man is called to be the guardian and steward of creation, exercising a shared sovereignty given by God. We have received everything from Him and can never thank Him enough. We are called to accept his gifts gratefully and to care for, develop, and enrich creation – which means welcoming others as gifts, participating in building up the

common good, and working together with others. Thus we fully realize our social nature, strengthening the bonds of fraternity and contributing to the flourishing of all.

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<sup>[1]</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 26.

<sup>[2]</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 487.

<sup>[3]</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 149.

<sup>[4]</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 164.

<sup>[5]</sup> Pope Francis, *Humana communitas*, no. 6.

<sup>[6]</sup> Pope Francis, Video message to TED 2017 in Vancouver (26 April 2017).

<sup>[7]</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 77.

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