



"Journeying gently on the earth"  
**Human ecology**

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## Introduction

*"The Church has a responsibility towards creation and must assert this responsibility in the public sphere. In so doing, it must defend not only earth, water and air as gifts of creation that belong to everyone. It must above all protect humankind from self-destruction. There is need for what might be called a human ecology, correctly understood. The deterioration of nature is in fact closely connected to the culture that shapes human co-existence: when 'human ecology' <sup>1</sup> is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits. Just as human virtues are interrelated, such that the weakening of one places others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its good relationship with nature." (Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, no. 51)*

"Journeying gently on the earth", an expression that echoes in a new way in our ears! The gentleness mentioned can recall the breath of a gentle breeze felt by Elijah at Horeb (1 K19:12), a sign of the infinitely discreet way God passes through our common house. It is a way of undoing some of our representations of the transforming action to be carried out in our societies: how can we "leave a trace", thanks to our works, but without disfiguring the creation that is confided to us? How can we "plough a furrow" but without doing violence to the soil, the earth that nourishes us and gives us shelter? How can we "think globally and act locally", but also change our framework, our scales <sup>2</sup> and our references in order to act globally, in solidarity with those who are far from us? It is a question of finding new images, new ways of inhabiting the earth.

This is a matter of great urgency! At the moment, we are completely schizophrenic: we have integrated the notion of the ecological footprint, but we are continuing to look for growth even though it is leading to the death of our ecosystems. How can we contribute to sustainable development for all, for 7 billion at the moment and soon 9 billion inhabitants? We, the rich, resist abandoning our predatory practices and imagining other, different, "sober and desirable" lifestyles. We refuse to "get smaller", to decrease our consumption in certain domains, whereas this is the condition for planetary survival. In this sense, we are going through an intellectual, moral and spiritual crisis in the face of the changes in the economic, energy and ecological spheres. In order to think in a different way, how do we mobilise our interior resources so as to re-invent our lives? This "human ecology", to use the beautiful expression of Benedict XVI, can be presented as a wonderful collective adventure – at the same time as it makes us sensitive to the cries of the earth and of those who are most vulnerable.

In order to sketch out the shape of the human ecology that is to be promoted, and in grateful memory of the thought of Hervé Renaudin<sup>3</sup>, I would like to borrow from him the triple movement that he liked to propose in order to reflect on our human existence: principle and foundation, centre

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* n. 38: *loc. cit.*, 840-841; DC 88 (1991) pp. 537-538; BENEDICT XVI, *Message for the World Day of Peace 2007*, n.8: *loc. cit.*, 779; DC 104 (2007) pp. 57-58

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Scales of Justice. Reimagining Political Space in a globalizing world*, Columbia University Press, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Hervé Renaudin, (1940-2003), professor of theological anthropology and pastor, bishop of Pontoise.

of attraction and centre of gravity. For us, the "principle and foundation" is relationship, the relation that unites us to God, to others and to the whole cosmos. It involves starting from a relation, and not just from "I", nor from "us". The "centre of attraction" is the transforming utopia of a creation that has been transfigured and reconciled. The "centre of gravity" consists of the various expressions of temperance in solidarity as a way of putting this relational utopia into effect in a concrete way: towards ecological democracies, towards relational economies and new measures of wellbeing, towards new educational projects.

## 1- Principle and foundation: relation

### A relational ontology

Many of our problems today originate in a particular conception of human beings and their relation with the world. We believed, through the unheard-of development of science and techniques since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, that we would become the "masters and owners of nature"<sup>4</sup>. We sometimes forget that the Cartesian perspective was itself open to an infinite dimension, first in the human being<sup>5</sup> – a perspective that we have largely left to one side. A strong tendency in our modern societies is to aim at a transformation of the material living conditions of these societies on the basis of the unlimited use of resources – natural and energy – in indeterminate quantities. This transformation proposed by the liberal economy starts and ends with the individual: the tendency was strengthened by recognition of the failure of the totalitarian regimes centred on collective development. Our Christian faith proposes, as do other philosophical currents, that we escape from imprisonment in the I/US dualism. It also enables us to escape from the quest for an indefinite accumulation of material well-being. At the base there is relationship. Not just I, not just US. An immaterial relation – a spiritual and a very real one. This begins in the Triune God who is "substantially" relation, a community of love. And this mystery unfolds in that of the cosmic Christ who binds together and reconciles all of Creation.

This approach, which takes relation as the characteristic of the human condition, this relational ontology, is particularly inspiring in the context of the ecological crisis. In such a perspective the human being is understood first of all as a relational being, but this does not mean that the human being loses his own identity. He is and becomes himself in a relation. In this respect we can talk of relational autonomy so to recognise both the relational and social dimension of each person and the person's capacity to make free choices. The German theologian, Karl Rahner, proposed a famous axiom, the "basic Christian law" concerning the relation between the human being and God. According to this law, "proximity and distance with regard to God grow to the same degree (and not inversely), God showing his divinity in us by the very fact that we are and that we become."<sup>6</sup> Can the

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<sup>4</sup> René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, 1637.

<sup>5</sup> René Descartes, *Méditations Métaphysiques*, 1650, 3<sup>rd</sup> Meditation : "I have in myself first the idea of the infinite before that of the finite, that is, (the idea) of God before that of myself."

<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner *Esquisse d'une dogmatique - Écrits théologiques TIV* p.33.

Rahner takes up this analysis again in *Traité fondamental de la foi*: "It is only when one experiences oneself with responsibility as a free subject before God, when one accepts this responsibility, that one understands

same be said about the relations of human beings with one another and with the cosmos? In this perspective, the more I am linked in a just way with others and with the ecosystems the more I discover the truth of myself as a relational being and can become autonomous and responsible. Recognition of the value of human beings and of living beings, and of the whole cosmos, leads me to a desire to journey gently on the earth and gives me criteria for choices. However, how am I autonomous if my choices are dictated by an exterior constraint, if I am first of all dependent, finite, limited, vulnerable? Here we need to distinguish the autonomy of a relational being and the (illusory) independence of an isolated being. Autonomy is thus understood from the moral angle of a will that is not alienated, one that is free because it chooses life. I am, of course, dependent on exterior factors that I do not control, but by deciding to look at them directly and, when possible, to transform these constraints into an open space, in the name of solidarity with creation and with humanity, I discover that I am more in harmony with this creation, that I am freer. The education of a child is indeed learning in this way about a space of what is possible on the basis of the experience of prohibitions and rules. Similarly, we can educate ourselves to develop a positive and adult approach to limits: what space of creation is made possible by internalising the finiteness of our world?

### Developing our relational capacities

This is the direction in which the idea of relational capacity can be developed. This capacity consists in the aptitude to have quality relations with the other, with God and with the whole of creation<sup>7</sup>. Several contemporary philosophical currents have reflected along these lines. Philosophies of history like that of Zubiri<sup>8</sup> emphasise the construction of each person within a specific historical and community framework, which the person makes his own, and in which his own choices contribute to the construction of a new reality. The approaches of recognition<sup>9</sup>, and of care<sup>10</sup> have highlighted what is at stake ethically and politically with regard to the vulnerability that is proper to the human condition. The development of each human being is a social process; we bear an individual and collective responsibility with regard to our neighbours – near and far – and to our ecosystems. The recent attempts to recognise an intrinsic value and "considerability" for each element of the cosmos, while according a specific role to human beings, are particularly interesting.<sup>11</sup> How, then, are we to identify the structures and institutions that hinder the unfolding of relational capacities and are a source of exclusion and social contempt<sup>12</sup> or of ecological and societal destruction<sup>13</sup>? It is to this work of individual and collective discernment that we must set ourselves. It is a question of evaluating our societies, an evaluation based on an analysis of the quality of the social, cultural, economic, ecological and political bonds that constitute these societies.

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what autonomy means, that it grows in the same proportion and that it does not diminish with the fact that one comes from God. It is only at this point that it appears to us that a person is, in the same movement, autonomous and dependent on his foundation." p.97.

<sup>7</sup> Cécile Renouard, « Le lien social dans un monde fini à l'épreuve de la globalisation », Mémoire de synthèse en vue de l'Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches, Septembre 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Xavier Zubiri, *Estructura dinámica de la realidad*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Gallimard, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> John Tronto, *Un monde vulnérable. Pour une politique du care*, Paris, La découverte, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Goodpaster, "Moral considerability" (1978), in *Ethique de l'environnement*, H-S Hafeissa (dir.), Paris, Vrin, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Axel Honneth, *La société du mépris. Pour une nouvelle théorie critique*, La Découverte, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the earth, cry of the poor*, Orbis Press, 1997.

How, at the same time, are we to take into account all the forms of resistance to relational autonomy, to the responsible exercise of individual liberty? Is there not a form of invincible violence in all our institutions as there is at the heart of creation?

## **An anthropology of trust rather than of violence**

Violence is omnipresent but it does not come first. The misdeed is second; the distorted relations between Cain and Abel are not the beginning of the world. To take the distinction made by Kant, the tendency to evil is not as original as the disposition to good. It is on this anthropology that we can depend in order to build projects for society that are not based on fear and mutual distrust, as in Hobbes, or on the artificial union between individual wellbeing and the happiness of all, as with the utilitarians. Again, taking relations as the starting point makes it possible to displace the individual/collective polarity that is at the origin of liberal utilitarian thought. In the concept proposed by Jeremy Bentham, with a view to the "greatest happiness for the greatest number", the sum of the functions of individual utility contributes to the well-being of the whole – in accordance with a mechanism close to that described by Adam Smith with the metaphor of the invisible hand. Each person, seeking to satisfy his own interests would, by that very fact, contribute to the overall growth of wealth. It was John Stuart Mill<sup>14</sup>, in the utilitarian camp, who first offered a strong criticism of that position: how is it possible to compare the incomparable choices of each human subject? Moreover, there is a risk of materialism, which consists in attributing greater value to the effort to satisfy material needs than to the quest for aesthetic, cultural and spiritual goods. Finally, an increase in collective well-being can always be accompanied by the sacrifice of this same well-being for a minority, or even for a majority of persons.

Rather than starting from the individual as a maximizer of his utility, or from the aim of the maximization of overall utility, let us try to start from relation: here it is a matter of maximizing the quality of relations within a society, a family, a group and between these groups, these societies etc. Two words are used in English to designate these networks: creating bonds (bonding) and building bridges (bridging). This presupposes that we look first at the nature and quality of a single link, which itself is linked with many others. In this perspective, the quality of the link or bond makes people be and makes possible the dignity that is accorded to each person. In the Christian perspective, the original bond is never called in question. Cain is always the son of the Father. The prodigal son is the object of inexhaustible gratuitousness: "all that is mine is yours". If the quality of the bond is put first, if it is the basis of the existence of all of us, then it can order our choices, both individual and collective.

## **2- Centre of attraction: a transforming utopia**

How do we represent for ourselves what is at stake for the social and ecological bond on a global scale? We cannot ignore the extreme forms of violence that our way of life is inflicting on our ecosystems and which our economic model is prepared to impose on peoples who are in precarious situations and increasingly vulnerable. How are we to make the foundation that is constituted by the quality of the bond, received from Another, the lever for new forms of social, economic and political organisation?

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<sup>14</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 1859.

## Enlightened gloom-mongering

An initial attitude is that of an enlightened gloom-mongering, defined by the philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy<sup>15</sup>, who was marked by the thinking on conviviality of Ivan Illich<sup>16</sup>. The declared aim is to denounce the dead ends involved in turning so-called technical progress into an absolute; in reality it sometimes causes such great damage that our societies spend their time repairing it in a way that enslaves them – that is to say, the opposite of the project of making human life autonomous thanks to technology. In the face of the ecological crisis, Dupuy emphasises that our technical and managerial forms of reasoning do not immunise us against catastrophe, but rather the contrary. We must emerge from the cost-benefit calculations proper to the managerial approach to risk and take very seriously the probability – even very slight – that a catastrophe might occur. We must imagine ourselves in the post-catastrophe situation so as to do everything possible, as of now, to avoid its occurring. Therefore, a metaphysical position should be adopted, one that was defended by two persons with the same name: the philosopher Hans Jonas<sup>17</sup>, and the prophet Jonas. However, it can be objected to Jean-Pierre Dupuy that imagining a catastrophic future is not enough to spur us into action. We are more and more aware of our global forms of interdependence but, for all that, we are not necessarily showing more solidarity. We are not taking the decisions at the level that would seem to be the proper one: for example, our inertia in the domain of the struggle against greenhouse gases is remarkable. We will move only when we are forced to do so, when we have our back to the wall. It will be all the easier for us to move if we know where we are going and if this direction can be perceived, not just as a distasteful future, but also as an attractive one.

## Representations of a transfigured Creation

In this perspective, side by side with this responsible clear-sightedness, we need to have a vigorous hope that stimulates our creative capacities. Let us sketch out utopias that make it possible for us to anticipate a possible future. Let us draw on our biblical and spiritual resources for that<sup>18</sup>. A God who became human, became a servant, who placed himself at the feet of human beings in order to express his love for them; a cosmos that sings of the life and the glory of God; a world where the wolf and the lamb dwell in peace together; a life that arrives beyond the suffering of childbirth; a forgiveness that opens on to something new that is possible. Applied to the present challenges, to the world of noise and fury that we know, is this a pipe dream? If we do not nurture collective images and representations of happy and just social relations, how will they come about? If, basically, we do not believe in them, who is going to bring them?

Doubtless, what we say only carries weight if it is accompanied by actions and attitudes that make it credible because they make it obvious, put it into action. The prophet or the saint is the one whose life is modelled on what he says. Utopia needs lives that are transformed so that it may be proclaimed and spread. Our world is in great need of precursors, of prophets, of poor persons who, aware of their limits, accomplish small actions, take small steps, associate with others and believe in the virtues of what is insignificant. It is thirsting for lookouts, those watching for the dawn who discern the signs of a new beginning. The religious life, whose members are called to be "sentinels of

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<sup>15</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé*, Seuil, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Ivan Illich, (*Tools for conviviality*, 1973), *La convivialité*, Seuil, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> Hans Jonas, *Le principe responsabilité*, 1979, Cerf, 1990.

<sup>18</sup> Ignacimuthu, *Environmental Spirituality*, The Bombay St Paul Society, 2010.

the invisible"<sup>19</sup> has something to say today: by the simplicity it is striving for, by the bonds of a fellowship that transcends borders, by its taste for a profound life. Simply because it bears witness that true happiness lies beyond idols and because it is a sign of the impossible.

### Relational equality

While the quality of the bond is the heart of this utopia, this bond requires a form of mutual recognition that excludes an over-arching dissymmetry. The only completely dissymmetric relation is that which exists between the Creator and his creature; the Creator himself reverses the movement by becoming "the very low"<sup>20</sup>. Thus, all forms of inequality that arise from idols that are greedily adored are illegitimate and destructive of this bond. We can then defend the principle that consists in always seeking first to improve the situation of those who are the least favoured, the most vulnerable. This principle of the *maximin*, defined by the American philosopher John Rawls<sup>21</sup>, fits in with the evangelical logic of the lost sheep or the prodigal father.

### 3 – Centre of gravity: a temperance of solidarity

A principle and a foundation that is relational, a centre of attraction that is a utopia which transforms a reconciled creation – and in practice? In our societies, the centre of gravity is the daily quest for the conditions of a human ecology that would express this concern to have just relations with God, with the other and with the cosmos. The expression "a temperance of solidarity" is a way of describing both the moderation that is necessary in the face of the *hubris* of our predatory behaviour and the nature of the motivation for living out this moderation: solidarity, the quality of the relation.

### Towards ecological democracies

How can this concern for well-adjusted relations with the cosmos be inscribed at the heart of political agendas? We must campaign for political projects and institutions that have been transformed at a deep level and which include a concern for the long term and for other societies of the planet in their decisions. Modern representative democracy has great difficulty in integrating the long-term environmental questions. How can the representative structures be modified at a deep level by the development of a participatory ecological democracy? The role of the environmental NGOs is highlighted in a special way, by Dominique Bourg et Kerry Whiteside<sup>22</sup>, as a means of going beyond the very short-term vision proper to political representatives elected in a given territory and having an agenda that is dependant on particular local interests. Also, science needs to be supervised by politics with a view to limiting the subordination of the techno-sciences to private and short-term interests. For that, new democratic institutions, linking up supervision by the citizens and the special knowledge of the scientists, are necessary. The authors propose the setting up of a Parliament in which the second chamber, the Senate, would have only a consultative voice but would be made up both of citizens drawn by lot for a fixed mandate and representatives of the people and of recognised environmental NGOs. An Academy for the Future would likewise be constituted, as a

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<sup>19</sup> This call by John-Paul II to women, at Lourdes, in August 2004, applies particularly to the religious life !

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Gonzalez Buelta, s.j., *La humildad de Dios*, Sal Terrae, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, 1971, *Théorie de la justice*, Seuil, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Dominique Bourg & Kerry Whiteside, *Vers une démocratie écologique. Le citoyen, le savant et le politique*, Seuil, 2010.



sort of enlarged economic, social and environmental council, to promote ongoing studies between specialists from various disciplines, between politicians, researchers and practitioners; these would be intended to facilitate the organisation of citizen meetings, “civic conversations”<sup>23</sup> and other participatory undertakings.

## Towards relational economies

This political perspective must be linked to a transformation of our economic models, moving towards what one might call a relational economy, one that would care for the quality of social and political relations and for ecology. Thus, it is question of defining and putting into effect at ecological and energy levels<sup>24</sup> the major transition plans that are indispensable in order to create jobs while changing our model and letting go of growth as we have known and understood it up to the present<sup>25</sup>. The work involved concerns as much town and country planning – the development of small dense towns, well connected, where people can get around on bicycle or by public transport – as the adoption of a less energy-consuming and less polluting form of agriculture, the re-localisation of industries in the countries of the north and the development of regional interior markets, the extension of rail networks, the reduction of air transport, the insulation of buildings, the selective reduction of the production and consumption of certain goods and services by the wealthy and middle classes, the struggle against waste, the purchase of rights to use goods rather than the individual possession of goods etc. These programmes would require that the co-ordination and planning by the public authorities be combined with the private and local initiatives. They also need to be supported by a shared vision, the transforming utopia of a Creation that is in solidarity. “Fewer goods, more linking-up”, that is a good summary of the economy that is to be promoted – while ensuring the provision of essential goods to all. As was recalled by John-Paul II and the patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, in a common declaration in 2002, “A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion to Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.”<sup>26</sup>

This urgent evolution of our models of production and consumption is also based on new ways of calculating the wealth that we create. We have a system that makes us count the work undertaken in the wake of a catastrophe as an element that generates growth, and yet does not take into account the wealth created by a housewife. How do we integrate into our projects the pressure exerted on the finite resources of the planet, how do we decrease our carbon footprint for example, while valuing the contribution made by an activity to the quality of the social fabric and of life together? It is indeed in that direction that studies propose new indicators of wealth and quality of

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<sup>23</sup> Marvin Brown speaks of « civic conversations » as the core of a new economic model based on making provisions rather than accumulating property. Marvin T. Brown, *Civilizing the Economy. A new economics of provision*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Alain Grandjean et Jean-Marc Jancovici, *C'est maintenant ! Trois ans pour sauver le monde*, Seuil, 2009. Tim Jackson, (*Prosperity without growth*, 2009), *Prospérité sans croissance*, De Boeck, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Gaël Giraud et Cécile Renouard (dir.), *20 Propositions pour réformer le capitalisme*, Flammarion, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> “A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion to Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act...” Declaration on the environment 2002 signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.



life: Manfred Max-Neef<sup>27</sup> in Chile in the 1980s, then Amartya Sen and other economists<sup>28</sup>, sociologists and philosophers. This applies both to the evaluation of small projects and to the situation of countries or entire regions. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) has drawn up an indicator of multi-dimensional poverty and has carried out research in Eastern Europe on an indicator of social exclusion. Gaël Giraud and I have constructed an indicator of relational capacity based on the relational anthropology mentioned earlier, which tries to measure the quality of the bonds and the level of inclusion of persons from the angle of access to relational goods, social recognition and civic involvement.

## Education for human ecology

New educational projects are appearing so as to educate people about what is at stake ecologically. Within a Christian perspective, the notion of human ecology could be a felicitous way of linking up the social and ecological dimensions, of showing the close link between interpersonal behaviour and collective behaviour, at the level of institutions, between human relations and relations with the planet. Some scholastic establishments have drawn up programmes intended to make the pupils sensitive to the ecological aspects, from the angle of reflection and of concrete action (recycled paper, bio/local food, economising energy, the struggle against waste, car-sharing etc.) Some teachers of economy, biology, philosophy, history/geography integrate these concerns into their teaching in an even more integrated way than is required by the school programme. Pastoral activities develop solidarity projects. What can we do to be equal to the challenges, not to relax our efforts, to go further and anticipate the change that is coming? No doubt we still have much to invent, notably in order to show the link between the growth of inequalities and predation, to rediscover the path to consuming local products, to forms of leisure activities that are less energy consuming, to reflection on the structural transformations to be brought about – so as to avoid philanthropy replacing questioning in terms of justice etc. We have, without doubt, a major role to play with the youth and indirectly with parents, so that they may become active bearers of change. And we must not underestimate the enormous resistance of those who see mainly what they have to lose in this new approach.

## Conclusion – Human ecology in the Assumption

Our spiritual roots make us sensitive to the different aspects of human ecology: once again, joyful detachment seems to be to be a particularly inspiring way to live out quality relations which our neighbours, near and far, and with the whole cosmos. If joyful detachment characterises God himself – the Trinitarian relations in which each person lets go of self in order to be given to the others and in that way find fulfilment – this attitude corresponds well to the quest for a humanity and creation that are transfigured, in which the bonds that are created make people be and live. That doubtless gives us criteria for relations that are adjusted to ourselves, to others and to the ecosystems: how do we see that the bonds we weave are not confining spiders webs but spaces of

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<sup>27</sup> Manfred Max-Neef, *Desarrollo a escala humana*, Nordan-Icaria, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Sabina Alkire, *Valuing Freedoms*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

life? How are we to be those who show others the way, not making themselves indispensable but finding their joy also in making way for those who lack resources and recognition, to the young, to the future generations?

Finally, joyful detachment is the capacity to be cultivated so as to get moving again, not through sheer effort but by leaning on the promise of life that God makes to us; by leaning also on others who express this love, this confidence in life, this liberty, to us. Far from being a disengagement from the world, joyful detachment calls us both to wonderment in the face of the beauty of the world and to action, here and now, so as to take care of our common dwelling, to heal this torn world. Thus the ethical and political concern for the future of the planet, for a world that would be more just and show more solidarity can draw on the spiritual source that is a joyful detachment.