



" Co-Responsibility and Care for the Vulnerable"

Theological Notes Inviting Further Thought, J.C. Cavadini

(Called & Co-Responsible: Summer Seminars for Church Life Renewal, July 8, 2020)

Hosted by Jessica Keating. Featured speakers include: John Cavadini, Charles Camosy, and Margaret Pfeil)

- 1 "Co-responsibility for the being and acting of the Church" has its theological roots, as we have already seen, in the royal priesthood of the baptized.
- 2 In *Lumen Gentium*, the "royal" dimension of the exercise of this priesthood is expressed as follows: "The Lord desires that his kingdom be spread by the lay faithful also: the kingdom of truth and life, the kingdom of holiness and grace, the kingdom of justice, love and peace. In this kingdom, creation itself will be set free from the slavery of corruption and will obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God (see Rom. 8.21) The faithful must, then, acknowledge the inner nature and the value of the whole of creation and its orientation *to the praise of God*" (LG 36, emphasis added).
- 3 Pope Francis picks up this theme in *Laudato Si'*, where he explains that "to the praise of God" means to the praise of God *instead of* ourselves, as though we were God and determined the value of everything around us. Pointedly, "We are not God," and even more pointedly, "the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures ... as if they have no worth in themselves and can be treated as we wish" (LS 68-69).
 - a. "The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us" (LS 83).
- 4 The same is true for other human beings. "Excessive anthropocentrism" always means that we value both other creatures and other humans disproportionately according to their *usefulness to us*: "When human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative ... leading [both] to environmental degradation and social decay" (LS 122).
- 5 This means "[w]e are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature" (LS 139).
- 6 This means in turn, "When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities – to offer just a few examples – it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected" (LS 117).
- 7 Thus our "co-responsibility for the being and acting of the Church" in this domain of exercise of the royal priesthood means exercising for ourselves, and leading others in, the "preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters" (LS 158).

- 8 What *Laudato Si'* teaches us is that to prefer “the poorest of the poor” means to exercise a preferential option for human dignity itself, since such a preference is exercised *instead of* the “normal” anthropocentric preferential option for everything *we* prefer: convenience, status, power, wealth, in other words, everything we prefer *instead of* human dignity, which is all that remains to the most vulnerable, the poorest of the poor. Two special cases:
- a. Abortion affords a uniquely foundational opportunity for the exercise of this preference: “How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties? ‘If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of the new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away’” (*LS* 120, citing B16, *Caritas in Veritate* 28).
 - b. From this point of view, “the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she *groans in travail* (Rom. 8.22, *LS* 2) subjected to a “throwaway culture” (*LS* 22) that scorches the dignity of creation itself.
- 9 The solution can never be simply strategic and practical because the reduction of everything to our own strategizing is part of the problem. The solution is in first “offering ourselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable” (Rom. 12.1, *LS* 220), an exercise of the baptismal priesthood which finds its supreme instance in the Eucharist, “the living center of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life” in which “all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation” (*LS* 236).
- 10 We come back to the idea that co-responsibility involves evangelization, irreducibly.