

Family, Motherhood & Development Goals – United Nations, 3/18/2014
“The Need for a New Environmentalism Embracing Human Life”
Mary Taylor, PhD.

The Millennium Declaration of the year 2000 can be praised for bringing the human person to the forefront of international attention. It recognizes “the responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity.” It resolves to “fully uphold the Declaration on Human Rights” (which says that “The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society... entitled to protection by society and the State”). It encourages implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which quotes the corresponding Declaration saying that “the child ... needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.”

After 15 years, the Millennium Development Goals (the MDGs) have been unevenly met, if they have been met at all in some areas, and there have been a number of critiques, so they are now being revisited.

Our topics - family and motherhood - deal with very important, issues, issues for which there is a wealth of social science research. Why then, has someone with a doctorate in philosophy been asked to address them? In this case, isn't philosophy extraneous - shouldn't we get right to the pragmatic level?

Well, all the goals require actions to meet them. Our actions – what means we choose to reach our ends – are our ethics - a branch of philosophy. Our ethics are strongly linked with what we take to be the true nature of the human person (philosophical anthropology, as distinguished from social science anthropology) and depend on what we think we can know about persons and the world and what we take to be ultimately real (the branches of epistemology and metaphysics or ontology).

So I do think philosophy is pertinent. Our other speakers will cover the extremely vital empirical data; however, as the introductory speaker, I thought that by way of background I might bring the deeper level, which grounds our pragmatic concerns, into sharper focus through three interconnecting images: Gandhi's Watch, the Smile of the Mother, and the Book of Nature. All three will, I hope, illuminate important truths about all of the MDGs, including my topic – the 7th goal of environmental sustainability.

GANDHI'S WATCH

The Millennium Development goals specify end results but are silent on the means to reach those ends. That alone is not a necessarily a fault, but it might lead one to believe that we simply need to find the most efficient way to reach the goals - whatever works.

Gandhi used a concrete example to illustrate the problem of means and ends. Imagine there is something you desire, something you see as good that you want -- a beautiful watch. In order to attain the watch, you could threaten the owner, fight him for it and steal it from him by force. (I will add that you could also get a law passed that says you have a right to confiscate it). Or you could offer a higher price than anyone else and buy it from him. Finally, you could ask him for it. The “end” result APPEARS the same – in all three cases, in the end you are in possession of the watch. But, Gandhi says,

according to the means I employ, the watch is stolen property, my own property, or a donation (a gift). Thus we see three different results from three different means. Will you still say that means do not matter?¹

If I may add my own expansion to Gandhi's image, what does the pursuit of the end do to you as a person, and your relationship with the original owner? In the first case, you become a thief, and your relation to others is one of coercion and force. In the second, the relation is purely a market one – you are a consumer, and the other is a seller – and your relationship has been reduced to a strictly economic, utilitarian contractual exchange. In the third case you are the recipient of a gift – and your relationship is quite different: that of a friend. Now of course, Gandhi knew perfectly well that sometimes you just want to buy a watch - nothing wrong with that. But he was using the image to make a larger point: what is the true end we seek, and how do the means affect the result? Martin Luther King said that the true end is “*reconciliation,*” “*redemption,*” “*the creation of the beloved community. It is only this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends.*”²

Gandhi's Watch tells us that the means we use to meet the goals really do matter. Solving the MDG problems of poverty, equality, sustainable development etc. cannot proceed by deficient means, for example by top-down dictates that often break communities apart into antagonistic opposers rather than joining them together as friends, or by attacks on the dignity and freedom of the person or family, or which brings us to our next image.

THE SMILE OF THE MOTHER

When we look at the goal areas - poverty, lack of education, equality and development, disease, environmental problems etc. – it is easy to see that they are all symptoms, all are related and all center on the person. And so the solutions must be integrated, and based on an *integral* philosophical anthropology, one that takes into account the whole person in all his or her reality: as a mother, a father, a friend, a worker, a citizen – not just one aspect. When I spoke of Gandhi's Watch I said that the MDGs do not specify the difference between the ends and the means to reach them; here, my point is that they hold up the person and dignity without specifying what they MEAN by “person” and “dignity.”

Persons have come under attack in so many ways: they have been reduced to pawns of powerful states on an international chessboard, to end consumers for corporations, to psychological subjects or egos, to entities that must have rational consciousness (so that the unborn, or the mentally ill, or those with Alzheimer's or Down's Syndrome are NOT persons). It is as if they had no standing, no dignity, unless it was *granted* to them by the state. If the meaning and dignity of a person is so capricious and arbitrary, depending on external evaluations, then like the thief or the consumer in Gandhi's story, the advantage would fall to whoever is stronger or richer.

¹ Gandhi, M.K. “Brute Force.” *Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*. 1909. Available online at <<http://www.mkgandhi.org/swarajya/ch016.htm>>.

² Martin Luther King, Jr. “The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation's Chief Moral Dilemma.” In King, 1991, p. 140.

How is the person seen in Gandhi's third example? Hans Urs von Balthasar gave us the image of "The Smile of the Mother" to illustrate some truths about ontology and phenomenology. Here it is enough to say that this original face-to-face encounter cannot be reduced to psychology alone, but unfolds the very meaning of being, especially that in this experience we first awaken to a reality that we did not create and which precedes us. It also makes it clear that persons are neither isolated units, nor replaceable, interchangeable cogs in mass social "populations." The child knows himself or herself as one with the mother, in a very real sense, while also coming to see that he or she is different from the mother. Because persons are ontologically constituted by a kind of "unity-in-diversity," the paradox is that the more we are in relation, the more we are fully, uniquely ourselves.

All human development unfolds from this point, extending from the mother, to wonder at other persons, to all of nature. The roots of the MDGs begin inside the family: we first learn the dignity – being unique and irreplaceable and beloved – in the family; our families are our first educators; and our equality – our equal worth, even though we have different roles -- is first manifested within the family.

And compare the relations of force, utility, and covenant. A thief, dictator, or bureaucrat, can hold a real or metaphorical gun to your head to get what they want. That's a relationship of coercion. A buyer enters an exchange, a contract --- sell me that watch, and I will pay you \$500 --- and once we each have what we want, the relationship is over. That is a relationship of utility (and even a bit of coercion: because contracts are external to the person, they require laws to enforce them). In the family, a covenantal relationship, an alliance of care and affection that is promised without regard to what we get in return, is based on shared goals and the giving of oneself, not simply exchanging an item, in coercion or utility.

No one is suggesting that we eliminate utility, law, or contracts; rather, we should see them inside something larger, what the Millennium Declaration calls "the common house of the entire human family." The point of "The Smile of the Mother" is that the MDGs will not be attainable if families and their innate dignity are reduced in any way, and even the necessary market functions will not succeed without the social cohesion of the family and the community, without mutual trust and true solidarity.

THE BOOK OF NATURE

Some philosophies simply are not adequate to reality: one extreme sees animals and the rest of nature as nothing more than resources for exploitation, and another is so concerned about the environment that it demeans the work and dignity of persons. Persons and the environment are often pitted against each, and there are ideological antagonisms directed against human life and dignity.

The third image, "The Book of Nature," has been used for thousands of years by theologians, philosophers, poets and naturalists to say that in a very real sense we can "read" reality from the world around us, a reality that is, like the smiling mother (Dante spoke of the "smile of the universe"), really there, that we do not have to be skeptical about. Benedict XVI said, "The **book of nature** is one and indivisible" and added that we should neither see nature as an untouchable taboo, nor should we abuse it. We need to take into account integral human development: both the environment *and* life, the family, social relations.

It is not simply that it would be “a good thing” to have sustainable development hand in hand with respect for life and the family ---- you cannot have one without the other. What I would like to do here is juxtapose two quotations, continuing with Benedict XVI:

The deterioration of nature is ... closely connected to the culture that shapes human coexistence: when “human ecology” is respected ... environmental ecology also benefits...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.... Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society.... Openness to life is at the centre of true development. When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man’s true good.³

For the second quote, it is interesting that some ecologists and other scholars have come to the same conclusion. They observe that when grassroots movements arise for environmental justice, they are often motivated by the impulse to protect the home, the family, and the community, and they even bring us back to the “The Smile of the Mother.”

The mother cradles the infant during feeding, and during this time the baby is ... perfectly positioned to gaze into the mother’s eyes.....research on mother-infant interactions and their importance for both subsequent social relationships and interest in physical environments can provide ecocriticism [ecological philosophy] with a paradigm of how we begin to perceive the nonhuman world...the first relationship, resulting in the strong attachment of the primary caregiver (usually but not necessarily the mother) and child, establishes the foundation for exploration of the environment....⁴

The Book of Nature and the Smile of the Mother merge here: both quotes point attention to the priority of the family in promoting environmental development and motivating environmental protection: “There is no relationship to nature without human attachments first.”⁵ Or as Wendell Berry said about the environment, “People exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love.”⁶

CONCLUSION

The task list of the 7th goal, “Ensure Environmental Sustainability” uses the very generic term “populations.” The family, and particularly the mother and child, are almost entirely missing from most work on sustainability. Children are occasionally mentioned in terms of the need to educate them about recycling or global warming, but sadly, there seems to be a rising contempt for them. They are often reduced to rivals to other biological entities and so this contempt is often in the context of population control, especially in its most aggressive forms (the pushing – and funding – of abortion to countries of the southern hemisphere, and tying development aid to abortion policies).

³ Benedict XVI. *Caritas in Veritate* 51, 28.

⁴ Nancy Easterlin, “Loving Ourselves Best of All: Ecocriticism and the Adapted Mind.” *Mosaic*. Volume: 37.3, 2004.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Wendell Berry. *Life is a Miracle*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2001. P. 41.

Wealthy countries tell the world's women that motherhood is an obstacle to their dignity and rights, rather than a constitutive part of their very identity as members of families and communities. Finally we come to the end, where we turn into the kind of people we should not want to be: I have seen “thank you for not breeding” bumper stickers at environmental events, and a famous ecologist said about saving the environment that “the freedom to breed is intolerable.... If we love the truth we must openly deny the validity of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”⁷

I may be a philosopher, but I do understand that environmental sustainability is extremely important – this isn't about bike paths for affluent Americans, but the destruction of communities by major mudslides from deforestation, massive, destructive, industrial pollution and much more. I collaborate with friends and colleagues working on issues of development and sustainability on almost every continent. They start with the intriguing question, “What if we turned things upside down, rethought the goals – what if we didn't start with what the Sustainability Report calls “cadres” of trained bureaucratic experts, or with institutionalized responses, but with subsidiarity, with the lowest levels first – that is, what if we saw that **families are the key drivers to sustainable environmental development?**

If I may close with my three images:

GANDHI'S WATCH: Gandhi said,

The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree; and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree. They say, “means are, after all, means.” I would say, “means are, after all, everything.”⁸

Means matter, and should take into account the relational truth of human persons and families in all their dignity.

The goals should begin where everything human begins – with our most primary family relationships, exemplified by THE SMILE OF THE MOTHER. It is the relationship between a giver and the recipient of a gift, not a thief or consumer. All the goals should be met by accompanying families on their journey, no matter how difficult. The former president of Uruguay said, regarding abortion, that “it is best to look for solutions based on a solidarity that supports the woman and the child, granting them the freedom of being able to find other options, and in this way, to save them both.”⁹

This applies as well to the environmental MDG. The BOOK OF NATURE is one and indivisible. The natural world makes human development possible in all of its aspects – spiritually, physically, economically, individually and in families. And authentic human development includes and requires respect for the natural world. You cannot deny one and have the other. We can, and must, save them both.

⁷ Garrett Hardin. “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162 (1968): 1243-1248. And James Lovelock, creator of the “Gaia Hypothesis,” said, “We need a more authoritative world. We've become a sort of cheeky, egalitarian world where everyone can have their say. ... It may be necessary to put democracy on hold for a while.” Interview with Leo Hickman. *Guardian* 29 March 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2010/mar/29/james-lovelock>

⁸ Gandhi, *op. cit.*

⁹ Tabaré Vázquez. “Statement of the President of Uruguay.” <http://www.hazteoir.org/node/15519>