

CHAPTER THREE

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD: STEWARDS OF VISIBLE CREATION

56. The first great theme within the theology of the *imago Dei* concerns participation in the life of divine communion. Created in the image of God, as we have seen, human beings are beings who share the world with other bodily beings but who are distinguished by their intellect, love and freedom and are thus ordered by their very nature to interpersonal communion. The prime instance of this communion is the procreative union of man and woman which mirrors the creative communion of Trinitarian love. The disfigurement of the *imago Dei* by sin, with its inevitably disruptive consequences for personal and interpersonal life, is overcome by the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. The saving grace of participation in the paschal mystery reconfigures the *imago Dei* according to the pattern of the *imago Christi*.

57. In the present chapter, we consider the second of the main themes of the theology of the *imago Dei*. Created in the image of God to share in the communion of Trinitarian love, human beings occupy a unique place in the universe according to the divine plan: they enjoy the privilege of sharing in the divine governance of visible creation. This privilege is granted to them by the Creator who allows the creature made in his image to participate in his work, in his project of love and salvation, indeed in his own lordship over the universe. Since man's place as ruler is in fact a participation in the divine governance of creation, we speak of it here as a form of stewardship.

58. According to *Gaudium et Spes*: "Man was created in God's image and was commanded to conquer the earth and to rule the world in justice and holiness: he was to acknowledge God as maker of all things and relate himself and the totality of creation to him, so that through the dominion of all things by man the name of God would be majestic in all the earth" (34). This concept of man's rule or sovereignty plays an important role in Christian theology. God appoints man as his steward in the manner of the master in the Gospel parables (cf. Luke 19:12). The only creature willed expressly by God for his own sake occupies a unique place at the summit of visible creation (Gen. 1:26; 2:20; Ps 8:6-7, Wisdom 9:2-3).

59. Christian theology uses both domestic and royal imagery to describe this special role. Employing royal imagery, it is said that human beings are called to rule in the sense of holding an ascendancy over the whole of visible creation, in the manner of a king. But the inner meaning of this kingship is, as Jesus reminds his disciples, one of service: only by willingly suffering as a sacrificial victim does Christ become the king of the universe, with the Cross as his throne. Employing domestic imagery, Christian theology speaks of man as the master of a household

to whom God has confided care of all his goods (cf. Mt 24:45). Man can deploy all the resources of visible creation according to his ingenuity, and exercises this participated sovereignty over visible creation in through science, technology and art.

60. Above himself and yet in the intimacy of his own conscience, man discovers the existence of a law which the tradition calls the "natural law." This law is of divine origin, and man's awareness of it is itself a participation in the divine law. It refers man to the true origins of the universe as well as to his own (Veritatis Splendor, 20). This natural law drives the rational creature to search for the truth and the good in his sovereignty of the universe. Created in the image of God, man exercises this sovereignty over visible creation only in virtue of the privilege conferred upon him by God. He imitates the divine rule, but he cannot displace it. The Bible warns against the sin of this usurpation of the divine role. It is a grave moral failure for human beings to act as rulers of visible creation who separate themselves from the higher, divine law. They act in place of the master as stewards (cf. Mt 25:14 ff) who have the freedom they need to develop the gifts which have been confided to them and to do so with a certain bold inventiveness.

61. The steward must render an account of his stewardship, and the divine Master will judge his actions. The moral legitimacy and efficacy of the means employed by the steward provide the criteria for this judgment. Neither science nor technology are ends in themselves; what is technically possible is not necessarily also reasonable or ethical. Science and technology must be put in the service of the divine design for the whole of creation and for all creatures. This design gives meaning to the universe and to human enterprise as well. Human stewardship of the created world is precisely a stewardship exercised by way of participation in the divine rule and is always subject to it. Human beings exercise this stewardship by gaining scientific understanding of the universe, by caring responsibly for the natural world (including animals and the environment), and by guarding their own biological integrity.

1. Science and the stewardship of knowledge

62. The endeavor to understand the universe has marked human culture in every period and in nearly every society. In the perspective of the Christian faith, this endeavor is precisely an instance of the stewardship which human beings exercise in accordance with God's plan. Without embracing a discredited concordism, Christians have the responsibility to locate the modern scientific understanding of the universe within the context of the theology of creation. The place of human beings in the history of this evolving universe, as it has been charted by modern sciences, can only be seen in its complete reality in the light of faith, as a personal history of the engagement of the triune God with creaturely persons.

63. According to the widely accepted scientific account, the universe erupted 15 billion years ago in an explosion called the “Big Bang” and has been expanding and cooling ever since. Later there gradually emerged the conditions necessary for the formation of atoms, still later the condensation of galaxies and stars, and about 10 billion years later the formation of planets. In our own solar system and on earth (formed about 4.5 billion years ago), the conditions have been favorable to the emergence of life. While there is little consensus among scientists about how the origin of this first microscopic life is to be explained, there is general agreement among them that the first organism dwelt on this planet about 3.5-4 billion years ago. Since it has been demonstrated that all living organisms on earth are genetically related, it is virtually certain that all living organisms have descended from this first organism. Converging evidence from many studies in the physical and biological sciences furnishes mounting support for some theory of evolution to account for the development and diversification of life on earth, while controversy continues over the pace and mechanisms of evolution. While the story of human origins is complex and subject to revision, physical anthropology and molecular biology combine to make a convincing case for the origin of the human species in Africa about 150,000 years ago in a humanoid population of common genetic lineage. However it is to be explained, the decisive factor in human origins was a continually increasing brain size, culminating in that of homo sapiens. With the development of the human brain, the nature and rate of evolution were permanently altered: with the introduction of the uniquely human factors of consciousness, intentionality, freedom and creativity, biological evolution was recast as social and cultural evolution.

64. Pope John Paul II stated some years ago that “new knowledge leads to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis. It is indeed remarkable that this theory has been progressively accepted by researchers following a series of discoveries in various fields of knowledge”(“Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on Evolution”1996). In continuity with previous twentieth century papal teaching on evolution (especially Pope Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani Generis*), the Holy Father’s message acknowledges that there are “several theories of evolution” that are “materialist, reductionist and spiritualist” and thus incompatible with the Catholic faith. It follows that the message of Pope John Paul II cannot be read as a blanket approbation of all theories of evolution, including those of a neo-Darwinian provenance which explicitly deny to divine providence any truly causal role in the development of life in the universe. Mainly concerned with evolution as it “involves the question of man,” however, Pope John Paul’s message is specifically critical of materialistic theories of human origins and insists on the relevance of philosophy and theology for an adequate understanding of the “ontological leap” to the human which cannot be explained in purely scientific terms. The Church’s interest in

evolution thus focuses particularly on “the conception of man” who, as created in the image of God, “cannot be subordinated as a pure means or instrument either to the species or to society.” As a person created in the image of God, he is capable of forming relationships of communion with other persons and with the triune God, as well as of exercising sovereignty and stewardship in the created universe. The implication of these remarks is that theories of evolution and of the origin of the universe possess particular theological interest when they touch on the doctrines of the creation *ex nihilo* and the creation of man in the image of God.

65. We have seen human persons are created in the image of God in order to become partakers of the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet 1:3-4) and thus to share in the communion of trinitarian life and in the divine dominion over visible creation. At the heart of the divine act of creation is the divine desire to make room for created persons in the communion of the uncreated Persons of the Blessed Trinity through adoptive participation in Christ. What is more, the common ancestry and natural unity of the human race are the basis for a unity in grace of redeemed human persons under the headship of the New Adam in the ecclesial communion of human persons united with one another and with the uncreated Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The gift of natural life is the basis for the gift of the life of grace. It follows that, where the central truth concerns a person acting freely, it is impossible to speak of a necessity or an imperative to create, and it is, in the end, inappropriate to speak of the Creator as a force, or energy, or ground. Creation *ex nihilo* is the action of a transcendent personal agent, acting freely and intentionally, with a view toward the all-encompassing purposes of personal engagement. In Catholic tradition, the doctrine of the origin of human beings articulates the revealed truth of this fundamentally relational or personalist understanding of God and of human nature. The exclusion of pantheism and emanationism in the doctrine of creation can be interpreted at root as a way of protecting this revealed truth. The doctrine of the immediate or special creation of each human soul not only addresses the ontological discontinuity between matter and spirit, but also establishes the basis for a divine intimacy which embraces every single human person from the first moment of his or her existence.

66. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is thus a singular affirmation of the truly personal character of creation and its order toward a personal creature who is fashioned as the *imago Dei* and who responds not to a ground, force or energy, but to a personal creator. The doctrines of the *imago Dei* and the *creatio ex nihilo* teach us that the existing universe is the setting for a radically personal drama, in which the triune Creator calls out of nothingness those to whom He then calls out in love. Here lies the profound meaning of the words of *Gaudium et Spes*: “Man is the only creature on earth that God willed for his own sake” (24). Created in God’s image, human beings assume a place of responsible stewardship in the physical universe. Under the guidance of divine providence and acknowledging the sacred

character of visible creation, the human race reshapes the natural order, and becomes an agent in the evolution of the universe itself. In exercising their stewardship of knowledge, theologians have the responsibility to locate modern scientific understandings within a Christian vision of the created universe.

67. With respect to the *creatio ex nihilo*, theologians can note that the Big Bang theory does not contradict this doctrine insofar as it can be said that the supposition of an absolute beginning is not scientifically inadmissible. Since the Big Bang theory does not in fact exclude the possibility of an antecedent stage of matter, it can be noted that the theory appears to provide merely indirect support for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* which as such can only be known by faith.

68. With respect to the evolution of conditions favorable to the emergence of life, Catholic tradition affirms that, as universal transcendent cause, God is the cause not only of existence but also the cause of causes. God's action does not displace or supplant the activity of creaturely causes, but enables them to act according to their natures and, nonetheless, to bring about the ends he intends. In freely willing to create and conserve the universe, God wills to activate and to sustain in act all those secondary causes whose activity contributes to the unfolding of the natural order which he intends to produce. Through the activity of natural causes, God causes to arise those conditions required for the emergence and support of living organisms, and, furthermore, for their reproduction and differentiation. Although there is scientific debate about the degree of purposiveness or design operative and empirically observable in these developments, they have *de facto* favored the emergence and flourishing of life. Catholic theologians can see in such reasoning support for the affirmation entailed by faith in divine creation and divine providence. In the providential design of creation, the triune God intended not only to make a place for human beings in the universe but also, and ultimately, to make room for them in his own trinitarian life. Furthermore, operating as real, though secondary causes, human beings contribute to the reshaping and transformation of the universe.

69. The current scientific debate about the mechanisms at work in evolution requires theological comment insofar as it sometimes implies a misunderstanding of the nature of divine causality. Many neo-Darwinian scientists, as well as some of their critics, have concluded that, if evolution is a radically contingent materialistic process driven by natural selection and random genetic variation, then there can be no place in it for divine providential causality. A growing body of scientific critics of neo-Darwinism point to evidence of design (e.g., biological structures that exhibit specified complexity) that, in their view, cannot be explained in terms of a purely contingent process and that neo-Darwinians have ignored or misinterpreted. The nub of this currently lively disagreement involves scientific observation and generalization concerning whether the available data

support inferences of design or chance, and cannot be settled by theology. But it is important to note that, according to the Catholic understanding of divine causality, true contingency in the created order is not incompatible with a purposeful divine providence. Divine causality and created causality radically differ in kind and not only in degree. Thus, even the outcome of a truly contingent natural process can nonetheless fall within God's providential plan for creation. According to St. Thomas Aquinas: "The effect of divine providence is not only that things should happen somehow, but that they should happen either by necessity or by contingency. Therefore, whatsoever divine providence ordains to happen infallibly and of necessity happens infallibly and of necessity; and that happens from contingency, which the divine providence conceives to happen from contingency" (Summa theologiae, I, 22,4 ad 1). In the Catholic perspective, neo-Darwinians who adduce random genetic variation and natural selection as evidence that the process of evolution is absolutely unguided are straying beyond what can be demonstrated by science. Divine causality can be active in a process that is both contingent and guided. Any evolutionary mechanism that is contingent can only be contingent because God made it so. An unguided evolutionary process – one that falls outside the bounds of divine providence – simply cannot exist because "the causality of God, Who is the first agent, extends to all being, not only as to constituent principles of species, but also as to the individualizing principles....It necessarily follows that all things, inasmuch as they participate in existence, must likewise be subject to divine providence" (Summa theologiae I, 22, 2).

70. With respect to the immediate creation of the human soul, Catholic theology affirms that particular actions of God bring about effects that transcend the capacity of created causes acting according to their natures. The appeal to divine causality to account for genuinely causal as distinct from merely explanatory gaps does not insert divine agency to fill in the "gaps" in human scientific understanding (thus giving rise to the so-called "God of the gaps"). The structures of the world can be seen as open to non-disruptive divine action in directly causing events in the world. Catholic theology affirms that the emergence of the first members of the human species (whether as individuals or in populations) represents an event that is not susceptible of a purely natural explanation and which can appropriately be attributed to divine intervention. Acting indirectly through causal chains operating from the beginning of cosmic history, God prepared the way for what Pope John Paul II has called "an ontological leap...the moment of transition to the spiritual." While science can study these causal chains, it falls to theology to locate this account of the special creation of the human soul within the overarching plan of the triune God to share the communion of trinitarian life with human persons who are created out of nothing in the image and likeness of God, and who, in his name and according to his plan, exercise a creative stewardship and sovereignty over the physical universe.

2. Responsibility for the created world

71. Accelerated scientific and technological advances over the past one hundred and fifty years have produced a radically new situation for all living things on our planet. Along with the material abundance, higher living standards, better health and longer life spans have come air and water pollution, toxic industrial wastage, exploitation and sometimes destruction of delicate habitats. In this situation, human beings have developed a heightened awareness that they are organically linked with other living beings. Nature has come to be seen as a biosphere in which all living things form a complex yet carefully organized network of life. Moreover, it has now been recognized that there are limits both to nature's resourcefulness and to its capacity to recover from the harms produced by relentless exploitation of its resources.

72. An unfortunate aspect of this new ecological awareness is that Christianity has been accused by some as in part responsible for the environmental crisis, for the very reason that it has maximized the place of human beings created in the image of God to rule of visible creation. Some critics go so far as to claim that the Christian tradition lacks the resources to field a sound ecological ethics because it regards man as essentially superior to the rest of the natural world, and that it will be necessary to turn to Asian and traditional religions to develop the needed ecological ethics.

73. But this criticism arises from a profound misunderstanding of the Christian theology of creation and of the *imago Dei*. Speaking of the need for an "ecological conversion," Pope John Paul II remarked: "Man's lordship is not absolute, but ministerial, ...not the mission of an absolute and unquestionable master, but of a steward of God's kingdom" (Discourse, January 17, 2001). A misunderstanding of this teaching may have led some to act in reckless disregard of the natural environment, but it is no part of the Christian teaching about creation and the *imago Dei* to encourage unrestrained development and possible depletion of the earth's resources. Pope John Paul II's remarks reflect a growing concern with the ecological crisis on the part of the Magisterium which is rooted in a long history of teaching found in the social encyclicals of the modern papacy. In the perspective of this teaching, the ecological crisis is a human and a social problem, connected with the infringement of human rights and unequal access to the earth's resources. Pope John Paul II summarized this tradition of social teaching when he wrote in *Centesimus Annus*: "Equally worrying is the ecological question which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In their desire to have and to enjoy rather than to be and grow, people consume the resources of the earth and their own lives in an excessive and disordered way. At the root of senseless destruction of the natural environment lies an anthropological error, which unfortunately is widespread in our day. Humankind, which discovers

its capacity to transform and in a certain sense create the world through its own work, forgets that this is always based on God' prior and original gift of the things that are" (37).

74. The Christian theology of creation contributes directly to the resolution of the ecological crisis by affirming the fundamental truth that visible creation is itself a divine gift, the "original gift," that establishes a "space" of personal communion. Indeed, we could say that a properly Christian theology of ecology is an application of the theology of creation. Noting that the term "ecology" combines the two Greek words *oikos* (house) and *logos* (word), the physical environment of human existence can be conceived as a kind of "house" for human life. Given that the inner life of the Blessed Trinity is one of communion, the divine act of creation is the gratuitous production of partners to share in this communion. In this sense, one can say that the divine communion now finds itself "housed" in the created cosmos. For this reason, we can speak of the cosmos as a place of personal communion.

75. Christology and eschatology together serve to make this truth even more profoundly clear. In the hypostatic union of the Person of the Son with a human nature, God comes into the world and assumes the bodiliness which he himself created. In the incarnation, through the only begotten Son who was born of a Virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, the triune God establishes the possibility of an intimate personal communion with human beings. Since God graciously intends to elevate creaturely persons to dialogical participation in his life, he has, so to speak, come down to the creaturely level. Some theologians speak of this divine condescension as a kind of "hominization" by which God freely makes possible our divinization. God not only manifests his glory in the cosmos through theophanic acts, but also by assuming its bodiliness. In this christological perspective, God's "hominization" is his act of solidarity, not only with creaturely persons, but with the entire created universe and its historical destiny. What is more, in the perspective of eschatology, the second coming of Christ may be seen as the event of God's physical indwelling in the perfected universe which consummates the original plan of creation.

76. Far from encouraging a recklessly homocentric disregard of the natural environment, the theology of the *imago Dei* affirms man's crucial role in sharing in the realization of this eternal divine indwelling in the perfect universe. Human beings, by God's design, are the stewards of this transformation for which all creation longs. Not only human beings, but the whole of visible creation, are called to participate in the divine life. "We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan with ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (Rm 8:23). In the Christian perspective, our ethical

responsibility for the natural environment – our “housed existence” – is thus rooted in a profound theological understanding of visible creation and our place within it.

77. Referring to this responsibility in an important passage in *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II wrote: “As one called to till and look after the garden of the world (cf. Gen 2:15), man has a specific responsibility towards the environment in which he lives, towards the creation which God has put at the service of his personal dignity. It is the ecological question – ranging from the preservation of the natural habitats of the different species of animals and other forms to “human ecology” properly speaking – which one finds in the Bible a clear and strong ethical direction leading to a solution which respects the great good of life, of every life....When it comes to the natural world, we are subject not only to biological laws but also to moral ones, which cannot be violated with impunity” (42).

78. In the end, we must note that theology will not be able to provide us with a technical recipe for the resolution of the ecological crisis, but, as we have seen, it can help us to see our natural environment as God sees it, as the space of personal communion in which human beings, created in the image of God, must seek communion with one another and the final perfection of the visible universe.

79. This responsibility extends to the animal world. Animals are the creatures of God, and, according to the Scriptures, he surrounds them with his providential care (Mt 6:26). Human beings should accept them with gratitude and, even adopting a eucharistic attitude with regard to every element of creation, to give thanks to God for them. By their very existence the animals bless God and give him glory: “Bless the Lord, all you birds of the air. All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord” (Dn 3:80-81). In addition, the harmony which man must establish, or restore, in the whole of creation includes his relationship to the animals. When Christ comes in his glory, he will “recapitulate” the whole of creation in an eschatological and definitive moment of harmony.

80. Nonetheless, there is an ontological difference between human beings and animals because only man is created in the image of God and God has given him sovereignty over the animal world (Gen. 1:26,28; Gen. 2: 19-20). Reflecting the Christian tradition about a just use of the animals, the Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms: “God entrusted animals to the stewardship of those whom he created in his own image. Hence it is legitimate to use animals for food and clothing. They may be domesticated to help man in his work and leisure” (2417). This passage also recalls the legitimate use of animals for medical and scientific experimentation, but always recognizing that it is “contrary to human dignity to cause animals to suffer needlessly” (2418). Thus, any use of animals must always

be guided by the principles already articulated: human sovereignty over the animal world is essentially a stewardship for which human beings must give an account to God who is the lord of creation in the truest sense.

3. Responsibility for the biological integrity of human beings

81. Modern technology, along with the latest developments in biochemistry and molecular biology, continues to provide contemporary medicine with new diagnostic and therapeutic possibilities. These techniques not only offer new and more effective treatments for disease, however, but also the potential to alter man himself. The availability and feasibility of these technologies lend new urgency to the question, how far is man allowed to remake himself? The exercise of a responsible stewardship in the area of bioethics requires profound moral reflection on a range of technologies that can affect the biological integrity of human beings. Here, we can offer only some brief indications of the specific moral challenges posed by the new technologies and some of the principles which must be applied if we are to exercise a responsible stewardship over the biological integrity of human beings created in the image of God.

82. The right fully to dispose of the body would imply that the person may use the body as a means to an end he himself has chosen: i.e., that he may replace its parts, modify or terminate it. In other words, a person could determine the finality or teleological value of the body. A right to dispose of something extends only to objects with a merely instrumental value, but not to objects which are good in themselves, i.e., ends in themselves. The human person, being created in the image of God, is himself such a good. The question, especially as it arises in bioethics, is whether this also applies to the various levels that can be distinguished in the human person: the biological-somatic, the emotional and the spiritual levels.

83. Everyday clinical practice generally accepts a limited form of disposing of the body and certain mental functions in order to preserve life, as for example in the case of the amputation of limbs or the removal of organs. Such practice is permitted by the principle of totality and integrity (also known as the therapeutic principle). The meaning of this principle is that the human person develops, cares for, and preserves all his physical and mental functions in such a way that (1) lower functions are never sacrificed except for the better functioning of the total person, and even then with an effort to compensate for what is being sacrificed; and (2) the fundamental faculties which essentially belong to being human are never sacrificed, except when necessary to save life.

84. The various organs and limbs together constituting a physical unity are, as integral parts, completely absorbed in the body and subordinate to it. But lower values cannot simply be sacrificed for the sake of higher ones: these values

together constitute an organic unity and are mutually dependent. Because the body, as an intrinsic part of the human person, is good in itself, fundamental human faculties can only be sacrificed to preserve life. After all, life is a fundamental good that involves the whole of the human person. Without the fundamental good of life, the values – like freedom—that are in themselves higher than life itself also expire. Given that man was also created in God’s image in his bodiliness, he has no right of full disposal of his own biological nature. God himself and the being created in his image cannot be the object of arbitrary human action.

85. For the application of the principle of totality and integrity, the following conditions must be met: (1) there must be a question of an intervention in the part of the body that is either affected or is the direct cause of the life-threatening situation; (2) there can be no other alternatives for preserving life; (3) there is a proportionate chance of success in comparison with drawbacks; and (4) the patient must give assent to the intervention. The unintended drawbacks and side-effects of the intervention can be justified on the basis of the principle of double effect.

86. Some have attempted to interpret this hierarchy of values to permit the sacrifice of lower functions, like the procreative capacity, for the sake of higher values, like preserving mental health and improving relationships with others. However, the reproductive faculty is here sacrificed in order to preserve elements that may be essential to the person as a functioning totality but are not essential to the person as a living totality. In fact, the person as a functioning totality is actually violated by the loss of the reproductive faculty, and at a moment when the threat to his mental health is not imminent and could be averted in another way. Furthermore, this interpretation of the principle of totality suggests the possibility of sacrificing a part of the body for the sake of social interests. On the basis of the same reasoning, sterilization for eugenic reasons could be justified on the basis of the interest of the state.

87. Human life is the fruit of conjugal love – the mutual, total, definitive, and exclusive gift of man and woman to one another – reflecting the mutual gift in love between the three Divine Persons which becomes fruitful in creation, and the gift of Christ to his Church which becomes fruitful in the rebirth of man. The fact that a total gift of man concerns both his spirit and his body is the basis for the inseparability of the two meanings of the conjugal act which is (1) the authentic expression of conjugal love on the physical level and (2) comes to completion through procreation during the woman’s fertile phase (*Humanae vitae*, 12; *Familiaris consortio*, 32).

88. The mutual gift of man and woman to one another on the level of sexual intimacy is rendered incomplete through contraception or sterilization.

Furthermore, if a technique is used that does not assist the conjugal act in attaining its goal, but replaces it, and the conception is then effected through the intervention of a third party, then the child does not originate from the conjugal act which is the authentic expression of the mutual gift of the parents.

89. In the case of cloning – the production of genetically identical individuals by means of cleaving of embryos or nuclear transplantation – the child is produced asexually and is in no way to be regarded as the fruit of a mutual gift of love. Cloning, certainly if it involves the production of a large number of people from one person, entails an infringement of the identity of the person. Human community, which as we have seen is also to be conceived as an image of the triune God, expresses in its variety something of the relations of the three divine Persons in their uniqueness which, through being of the same nature, marks their mutual differences.

90. Germ line genetic engineering with a therapeutic goal in man would in itself be acceptable were it not for the fact that it is hard to imagine how this could be achieved without disproportionate risks especially in the first experimental stage, such as the huge loss of embryos and the incidence of mishaps, and without the use of reproductive techniques. A possible alternative would be the use of gene therapy in the stem cells that produce a man's sperm, whereby he can beget healthy offspring with his own seed by means of the conjugal act.

91. Enhancement genetic engineering aims at improving certain specific characteristics. The idea of man as “co-creator” with God could be used to try to justify the management of human evolution by means of such genetic engineering. But this would imply that man has full right of disposal over his own biological nature. Changing the genetic identity of man as a human person through the production of an infrahuman being is radically immoral. The use of genetic modification to yield a superhuman or being with essentially new spiritual faculties is unthinkable, given that the spiritual life principle of man – forming the matter into the body of the human person – is not a product of human hands and is not subject to genetic engineering. The uniqueness of each human person, in part constituted by his biogenetic characteristics and developed through nurture and growth, belongs intrinsically to him and cannot be instrumentalized in order to improve some of these characteristics. A man can only truly improve by realizing more fully the image of God in him by uniting himself to Christ and in imitation of him. Such modifications would in any case violate the freedom of future persons who had no part in decisions that determine his bodily structure and characteristics in a significant and possibly irreversible way. Gene therapy, directed to the alleviation of congenital conditions like Down's syndrome, would certainly affect the identity of the person involved with regard to his appearance and mental gifts,

but this modification would help the individual to give full expression to his real identity which is blocked by a defective gene.

92. Therapeutic interventions serve to restore the physical, mental and spiritual functions, placing the person at the center and fully respecting the finality of the various levels in man in relation to those of the person. Possessing a therapeutic character, medicine that serves man and his body as ends in themselves respects the image of God in both. According to the principle of proportionality, extraordinary life-prolonging therapies must be used when there is a just proportion between the positive results that attend these therapies and possible damage to the patient himself. Therapy may be abandoned, even if death is thereby hastened, when this proportion is absent. A hastening of death in palliative therapy by the administration of analgesics is an indirect effect which, like all side-effects in medicine, can come under the principle of double effect, provided that the dosage is geared to the suppression of painful symptoms and not to the active termination of life.

93. Disposing of death is in reality the most radical way of disposing of life. In assisted suicide, direct euthanasia, and direct abortion - however tragic and complex personal situations may be - physical life is sacrificed for a self-selected finality. In the same category is the instrumentalization of the embryo through non-therapeutic experimentation on embryos, as well as by pre-implantation diagnostics.

94. Our ontological status as creatures made in the image of God imposes certain limits on our ability to dispose of ourselves. The sovereignty we enjoy is not an unlimited one: we exercise a certain participated sovereignty over the created world and, in the end, we must render an account of our stewardship to the Lord of the Universe. Man is created in the image of God, but he is not God himself.

CONCLUSION

95. Throughout these reflections, the theme of the imago Dei has demonstrated its systematic power in clarifying many truths of the Christian faith. It helps us to present a relational - and indeed personal - conception of human beings. It is precisely this relationship with God which defines human beings and founds their relationships with other creatures. Nonetheless, as we have seen, the mystery of the human is made fully clear only in the light of Christ who is the perfect image of the Father and who introduces us, through the Holy Spirit, to a participation in the mystery of the triune God. It is within this communion of love that the mystery of all being, as embraced by God, finds its fullest meaning. At one and the same

time grand and humble, this conception of human being as the image of God constitutes a charter for human relations with the created world and a basis upon which to assess the legitimacy of scientific and technical progress that has a direct impact on human life and the environment. In these areas, just as human persons are called to give witness to their participation in the divine creativity, they are also required to acknowledge their position as creatures to whom God has confided a precious responsibility for the stewardship of the physical universe.