Today, we all speak of ecology, of the environment, of global warming, and it is logical to do so. There are those who participate in this conversation because it seems the “in” thing to do; they will lose interest when the theme is replaced by the next “fad”, at which point the theme of the environment will no longer be “stylish”. This is not the case for this 2016 Conference of Mission Bishops. Certainly, reflecting on integral Ecology is to listen to the voice of the poor.

1. **The concept of Mercy in the mind of Pope Francis:**

   “We need constantly to contemplate the mystery of mercy… Mercy: the word reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy: the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy: the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy: the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to the hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness. “(Misericordiae vultus,2).

   This quotation helps us understand the notion of mercy according to the mind of the Holy Father. In it he offers four aspects that orient us as do the cardinal directions: they point to heaven and guide us to look at our neighbor, and our brothers and sisters from the starting place of the heart.

   Mercy is a divine reality with human derivations; for this reason the Jubilee motto, “merciful as the Father,” invites and reminds us to imitate Christ who is the very countenance of divine mercy. The fount of mercy is the mystery of the Holy Trinity, coming close to us in Jesus Christ. From this intimate proximity is born the need to profess and proclaim mercy and to give mercy its rightful place as the center, the very birthplace of all the Church’s activity.

   Pope Francis tells us that Mercy is the bond of union between God and humanity, because “In mercy, we find proof of how God loves us. He gives his entire self, always, freely, asking nothing in return…” (Misericordiae Vultus,14). Thus Mercy opens our hearts to the hope of being loved in spite of the limitations of our sin. God’s mercy enlarges the human heart, stretching it wide enough to create a welcoming place for every neighbor as well as for the created world, our common home.

   In the canticle of the Magnificat: the Virgin Mary says: “His mercy reaches to the faithful - generation after generation” (Lk 1:50), and she becomes the spokesperson of all believers, who, in her Son Jesus Christ, encounter the Mercy of God.

   For Pope Francis, the concept of Mercy is biblical, sapiential and theological, following the same intuitions of St. Isidore of Seville, of St. Bede the Venerable, St. Bonaventure, St. John Paul II, and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI.
But in his gestures and in his actions well known to all, spread far and wide by the media, we have a surprising way to show the world that Mercy is not simply compassion; Mercy goes beyond benevolence and philanthropy, because in its essence, Mercy is Love.

The world is moved when it sees these gestures of Pope Francis, creatively carrying out the Works inspired by Mercy, because it seemed that Mercy had somehow become relegated to the past, belonging to the former glorious ages of Christianity, not quite extending to our generation, to this time of darkness in which we are assailed by doubt and the fear that the Lord has distanced himself from us.

Nevertheless, the Pope, inspired in the same canticle of Mary, wants us to see that the Mercy of the Lord lasts “from generation to generation.” And we must recognize that, if we look around us with simple and pure eyes of faith, we can become sensitive enough to perceive even the most subtle signs of God’s mercy.

And it is these noticeable signs of God’s mercy which the world sees and interprets as prophetic gestures inspired by Love. Let us not forget that a Prophet is one who perceives his very existence as forged by the power of the Word of God. This is the case with Pope Francis; hence his concern that the world perceive the very nature of the Church to be merciful.

And since doctrinal thought can be held prisoner within the confines of words, and since linguistic expressions at times obscure rather than bring clarity to the richness of a given message, the Pope not only “talks the talk”, but “walks the walk”, putting his words into action, because he knows that the world has to see in order to understand. The testimony of action is what is actually seen, while discourse is merely what is spoken. And thus we see Pope Francis’ testimony of action in simple things such as showers and toilets for homeless people, a dining room, guest quarters, the welcoming of migrant workers, and his pleasure in visiting jails. Through these things and in so many other ways, he shows the world that love is projected through concrete acts. This, more than anything else, strengthens and gives credence to the ascent of the Pope as a public figure in the eyes of the world.

The history of the revelation of God toward human beings, of God’s dealings with the people of God, of God’s closeness to each one of us is a story of Mercy. Psalm 136, narrating the account of the relationship between God and human beings, constantly repeats: “eternal is His mercy.” (See MV, 7). We are all called to extend the story of salvation history, incorporating our own story into that narrative of God’s mercy, and exclaiming: “eternal is His mercy.” That is what Pope Francis has longed to teach us.

While Mercy may not be the only characteristic of God, it is certainly the principal aspect of his character. All of God’s additional qualities are in service of Mercy. If God is eternal, it is in order to show eternal Mercy, from “generation to generation.” If God is all-powerful, it is in order to place His omnipotence at the service of His mercy. If God is wisdom, wisdom’s principal goal is to direct and guide God’s mercy.
The one who does not perceive or feel the mercy of God knows nothing of God; neither will that person comprehend those of us who want to show the mercy of God to others.

Blessed Paul VI told us in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that “the Church exists to evangelize.” If the Church does not communicate and testify to the Good News, she stops being Church. The mission of each local church, of every diocese, is the mission to announce the Good News. In the Bible, “the multiplication of the loaves” is the only text in the four gospels which is repeated six times. It is a teaching on the Lord’s concern for material and spiritual hunger. Gently, but firmly, the persistent repetition of this passage reveals Jesus’ model and mandate “to share from the little bit we have.” What is evangelization about? Evangelization consists of carrying out Word of God and making real God’s Kingdom. Many people say they have nothing to share, but the insistent message of this Gospel story is not about giving material things, but rather in valuing each person by giving affection, smiling, and listening from the heart.

2. What can we do to truly become ‘a church which is poor and for the poor’ (EG 198) as Catholics in the U.S.?

For my part, I want to share these reflections from my position as a Bishop in a poor country but also from the experience of eight years of being President of CARITAS International. I do not pretend to lecture anyone, but rather, to reflect along with you who serve in this great Country.

The very existence of the Catholic Church Extension Society of the U.S.A. is a clear sign of your concern for the poor. The work you have done in your 110-year-long history is indeed impressive. Catholic Extension has provided more than a billion dollars to provide financial support for the Church in the United States and its territories. You have financed the construction or repair of 12,500 churches.

But in the History of the Church there is always the temptation to be a wealthy Church, comfortable and of the middle-class. Or, as Pope Francis says, we return to being “self-referential,” running the risk of converting the life of faith into pure pragmatism. The Holy Spirit helps us not to confuse what comes from God with the fruit of ideologies. St. Paul tells us in his famous ode to charity in the first Letter to the Corinthians that all knowledge, all heroic acts, martyrdom and even the most solid faith without charity, are nothing (see 1 Cor 13:1-13).

The Gospel tells us that “we will be known by our fruits” (see Mat 12:33), and that our vital union with Christ is manifested in the fruits it produces, because the glory of God the Father is that we bear fruit (see Jn 15:1-8).

St. James insists that the Works of fraternal love “are the proof that our faith is authentic and alive” (see James 2:14-26). The gospel of Matthew tells us that Jesus will judge us according to the response we have given or failed to give to our suffering neighbor (Mt 25:31-46). Traditionally, we have called such responses “Works of Mercy.”
The care of the poor, the preferential option for them, not only has been a constant gospel mandate, but also one of the most dynamic and renewing elements possible for the People of God. When we read about the lives of the saints and the origins of so many religious Congregations, we end up surprised by such impressive testimonies of love and complete, and utter dedication.

Our Holy Father Francis, in his Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, hand in hand with St. Thomas, presents us with this beautiful reflection “Works of love directed to one’s neighbor are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit..., which is seen in the faith that works through love... As far as the external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of the virtues...” (EG, 37). This is true, because faith activates charity.

A Church which is economically secure and positioned may run the risk of focusing on enlarging her barns and refilling her silos, while at the same time, that very Church could be dying in the very near future—as Jesus describes for us in the parable. Whatever the Church has, whether little or much, is for the development of the pastoral mission, for catechesis, for evangelization, for works of charity, for welcoming the migrants and immigrants, for sustaining the most fragile parish communities and for solidarity among the Churches. The danger in having lots of money, in depending on grand facilities and significant property assets, is that the Church can give the impression of self-sufficiency and vanity to the world, and not, as Pope Francis insists in *Evangelii Gaudium* (198), being a “Church that is poor and for the poor.”

“The real poverty that we encounter among ourselves, is the one that challenges us, and it represents a great challenge indeed. In the Bible, poverty is not only an economic issue. In the Bible, the poor one is the marginalized one, the insignificant one, the one that does not count and does not have power, the “non-person.” We can be insignificant due to the color of our skin, by being born a woman, due to belonging to another culture, through old age, for being children; I believe that is the biblical notion that expresses real poverty” (Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, 13.05.2015).

Thus, “poverty is not a destination, it is a condition; it is not a misfortune, it is an injustice; we human beings have caused it and for this reason, we can change it. Believing it is a complex fact and that it is in our hands to change it, renews the meaning of sharing. Direct and immediate help to the needy is no longer enough, we have to go to the causes of poverty and denounce them and try to change them. It is about a historic, changeable reality. Real poverty means early death. The first violence in society is the violence of poverty because it goes against human rights: the right to life is the first Human Right. The poor are those who die of diseases which could be cured, but are not, because the poor lack access to the necessary medical care. But there are also cultural deaths: if a culture is despised, it kills a community. The issue of the environment is another reality that is a question of life and death (P. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *ibid*), and for this reason, Pope Francis wanted *Laudato Si* be a treatise about life...”
And that is why since the Medellin Conference in 1968 until Aparecida in 2007, the preferential option for the poor has been a constant among us:

“The convergence of real poverty with spiritual poverty is what leads us to adopt a simple life, close to the poor. We recognize that real poverty, always and without exception, is an evil. Therefore leading us to the immediate reaction to eliminate it. That is what it means to be the “Church that is poor and is for the poor.”

We become neighbors when we worry about the other, when we draw near and encounter him or her. It is a shame to see how the word charity is being lost; it has become confused with alms-giving by the rich to the poor. We must recover true charity, recognizing that justice is the first step towards charity; it is to recognize the dignity of other people, it is an act of love for each person.

At the same time this love has a profound depth and is global in scope. We cannot confuse legality with justice; legality is not always just. I believe that we must recover the true sense of Charity; we cannot impose our love, we must truly understand the deep meaning of charity. There is no Charity without justice.” (See Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, id).

The Gospel criterion for having property and wealth is measured by the degree to which those resources are administered according to the needs of the poorest of the poor, with an attitude of solidarity and greater universality.

We transcend the very walls of institutional stability to which we are accustomed when we see others through the eyes of fraternal love. When we do this, we walk towards Christian communion. We walk toward sharing all things in common because through the gesture of sharing what we have, even when we may not have much, like the widow in the Gospel, we give until it hurts. This bears witness that we are able to overcome our materialistic attachment to money and – from this point of gratuitous giving - we can forge new pathways of participation and communion with the poorest dioceses and parishes. Communion is not a concept; it is a precept. Communion takes place when the unity of the Body of Christ is built among all Churches—a unity of faith, of celebration, of charity, that is characterized by the ongoing practice of giving up something of our own in order to make unity possible within diversity.

• Sharing our goods with the needy (see Heb 4:34), giving alms to the poor (see 2 Cor 8) and practicing hospitality among the churches (see 1 Tim 5:10), are practical actions through which the Church – that sees herself as poor, and wants to be seen as poor in the eyes of the world – can have great impact as these actions become part of the ordinary and habitual behavior of communities and their members.

3. Relationship between poverty and care of the environment, Pope Francis' notion of ‘integral ecology’.

In the Encyclical letter Laudato Si: On the care of Creation, Pope Francis presents us with an authentic treasure of ideas and solutions for our present world so
deeply in crisis. The Encyclical text, as the pontiff says, is for everyone, believers and non-believers, although it has very clear messages for the Christian world and, particularly for Catholics. The theme of integral ecology is very important. In the Encyclical, the idea that all things are closely related is essential and therefore our current problems require a broad view of all the factors related to the global crisis.

The Encyclical uses the term “ecology” in reference to how complex systems can only be understood by first understanding the relationships among individual parts and how they relate to the whole, as in the case of ecosystems (see Laudato Si 22, 140).

When speaking of integral ecology, Laudato Si, combines environmental, economic, social, and cultural terminology with those of daily life and continually refers to the common good and to intergenerational relationships (see # 9). The present serious ecological crisis affects us all, even though we are not equally responsible for its causes.

The problems have been caused by the poor in a lesser degree, because they have only a small measure of responsibility for these problems. In Laudato Si, Pope Francis points out that the poor are the ones who suffer the gravest consequences of environmental degradation. He has also reaffirmed this in his recent speech to the environmental ministers of the Countries who are members of the European Union (09.16.2015).

The concept of “integral ecology” includes human and social dimensions. This perspective is absolutely necessary in order to understand the current crisis, and in order to move forward toward its solutions. Ecology studies the relationships between living organisms and the environment in which they develop. The concept of integral ecology is essential for understanding the complex relationships between human beings and the planet, and also for finding the path toward the common good of humanity within the context of our common home.

Pope Francis points out that when we speak of ‘environment’, we refer particularly to a relationship that exists between nature and the society that dwells in it. Therefore, nature is not something separate from us or a mere framework surrounding our life. We are included in nature, we are part of nature and we are intimately inter-related and influenced by each other.”

For this reason, the Pope’s message invites us to: + be protectors of creation, which is a good in itself. + a moral conversion in order to care for that which we venerate and appreciate. + a new global solidarity.

“Cultivating and caring for creation”, said the Pope, has been a mandate from God, “given not only at the beginning of human history, but to each one of us; it is part of His project.” Therefore, it is the task of all to help the world grow in a responsible manner, “transforming it so that it may be a garden, a habitable dwelling for all.”
Taking into account the teachings of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who reminded us that “the task entrusted to us by God the Creator requires capturing the rhythm and logic of creation”, and warned that often humanity is carried away “by the pride of domination, of possessions, of manipulation, of taking advantage of creation; we do not “care” for it, nor respect it, nor consider it as a gracious gift which we must safeguard.

Pope Francis says that this “cultivating and caring” is not only related to the relationship among people and the environment, but it also deals with human relationships; it is the human person that “is in danger.”

The call to be protectors is integral and it embraces everything: we are all called to protect and care for creation and for the human person. The challenges that result from global inequality and the destruction of the environment are interrelated; and presently they are the greatest threats to the human family. Challenged by scientific evidence, but even more, by the actual experiences of the peoples who undergo the disasters linked with climate change, we are called to take care of humanity and to respect the structure of the natural world, seeing them as assets in and of themselves. We all have a role to play in protecting and maintaining what Pope Francis has called our common home. He urges us to be catechized, so to speak, through the formation process of ecological citizenship. That is why, on August 6, 2015, the Holy Father instituted for Catholics the “World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation”, to be celebrated every September 1st, a date that had been established for that purpose many years ago by the Orthodox Church. The environmental issue is also a theme of ecumenical interest.

All our efforts for counteracting climate change, poverty and inhumane conditions require an integral focus on ecology. Binding regulations, policies and objectives are necessary instruments for fighting poverty and climate change, but they will be of little effect if they are not accompanied by our moral conversion and a change of heart. The radical transformation which is needed cannot be reduced to legislation, policies or solutions that are merely scientific, economic or technical.

For effective results to take place, whatever action is taken must be accompanied by an “ecological conversion,” a true conversion of mind, heart, life style—resulting in a new life of solidarity.

Pope Francis urges all people—individuals, families, local communities, whole nations and the international community—to an “ecological conversion,” in harmony with the injunction of St. John Paul II; to a “change of direction” assuming the beauty and the responsibility incumbent in the task of “caring for our common home.” Pope Francis expresses hope in the possibility of reversing the current direction: “since humanity still has the ability to work together to build our common home.” (Laudato Si # 13). “Men and women are still able to intervene in a positive way” (Laudato Si #58). “Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of destruction to an extreme degree, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and catalyzing regeneration” (Laudato Si, # 205).
Pope Francis also speaks about cultural, environmental, economic and social ecology. In addition, he mentions the absolute need to clothe ourselves daily in an ecology for everyday living. In this way, as we illuminate life with ecology, we can also reach transcendence, through spiritual ecology.

4. A great challenge is the lure of the “throw-away culture”, which influences how we treat our fellow human beings and contributes to the waste of resources and consumer goods.

We live within a system based upon erroneous ideas. If a piece is missing, the rest falters. We have to change our way of thinking. Without ethics we cannot speak of a harmonious and just culture where the person prevails as the center of all human activity and in which natural resources, human capital, and society would be equally and proportionately integrated.

It is important to highlight the consequences of consumerism:
-- It jeopardizes the ecological equilibrium through excessive consumption of natural resources and pollution.
-- It changes the style of consumption, because everything is more accessible.
-- It enables the unequal distribution of wealth. Commercial producers of goods receive more and more benefits, while consumers typically have only limited access to such benefits.
-- When consumption increases, families’ expenses increase. In addition, the products purchased last for a shorter and shorter duration time, requiring the frequent replacement of goods.
-- At the personal level, consumer behaviors are less than healthy, with the destructive and progressive potential to sicken us in the form of actual addictions.

In spite of the continual rise of consumption in today's society, we all have the necessary tools to avoid falling into its trap. In an inverse proportion, as our buying power increases, we ask ourselves less and less if what we are buying is really necessary.

Definitely, the education we receive growing up is of the utmost importance, so that we do not grow into heartless consumers who view every item, and even people, as disposable objects, to be used and then thrown away.

We know that the greatest indicator of a country’s wealth is the GDP (Gross Domestic Product); this includes the goods, services and products but it does not take into account sicknesses, accidents, or environmental disasters...

Therefore, this indicator seems to reflect clearly the economic situation of a country at a given moment but, even then, it hides a part that we do not see. This gauge of economic robustness has serious deficiencies, since the only important measurement is production quantity, but not quality. (Whether production involves food or weapons, it makes no difference). All of this exacerbates the situation. Neither does the GDP indicator take into consideration the equitable distribution of wealth.
We must see clearly that an increase of a country’s GDP does not always translate as an improvement in its economy, although it is evident that its growth always is a favorable part of the whole. It would be more beneficial for everyone if this indicator could take into consideration all the additional factors that truly affect human well-being.

The Popes have urgently called our attention to what is called “human ecology,” which is not only an economic issue, “but a question of ethics and anthropology.” Pope Francis laments that the human being is no longer the point of reference for certain decisions; that point of reference has now become “the almighty dollar.”

As Pope Francis reminds us, “cultivating and caring for creation” has been a mandate from God, “given not only at the beginning of history, but to each one of us; it is part of His project.” Therefore it is the task of all to make the world grow with responsibility, “transforming it so that it be a garden, a please where everyone can dwell.”

Taking into consideration the teachings of the emeritus pope Benedict XVI, who reminded us that “the task entrusted to us by God the Creator requires capturing the rhythm and logic of creation,” the Holy Father says that often man is led by “the pride of domination, of possessions, of manipulation, of taking advantage, and we do not “take care” of it, respect it, or consider it as a free gift that we must take care of.” According to Pope Francis this “cultivating and caring” not only refers to persons and the environment, but also includes human relationships, with the human person who “is in danger.”

I believe this is the point at which we must review our examination of conscience.

The Pope reminds us in his teaching (Worldwide Environment Day, 2013) that “God our Father has charged us with taking care of the earth, not money, but, rather, taking care of human beings, of men and women,” denouncing that often men and women “are sacrificed before the idols of profit and consumerism,” with which a “throw away culture” is being shaped.”

“If a computer is broken it is a tragedy, but poverty, the needy, the dramas of so many persons end up being seen as normal,” Pope Francis continued, pointing out that if “some homeless persons die in the streets because of the cold, it is not news (…); in contrast, a ten-point drop in the stock market is a tragedy.”

In reference to the so called “throw away culture”, Francis greatly laments that in it “human life, the life of a person, is no longer perceived as the primary value that should be respected and protected, particularly if people are poor or disabled, if they are not yet viewed as useful—such as an unborn child—, or have ceased to be seen as useful, like the elderly.”

And the same is true in regard to food. In keeping with the theme of World Environment Day (2013), the Pope warns that this culture of waste “has made us insensitive in general, and especially to food that is discarded, when in many
other parts of the world, sad to say, there are many persons and families who suffer from hunger and malnutrition.”

This was the occasion for him to remind us “that the food which is discarded is as if were stolen from the table of the poor, of the hungry!” For this reason he encouraged everyone to reflect “on the problem of waste and throwing food away, with the goal of finding the means to seriously address this problem, which can also lead to solidarity and of sharing with those in greatest need.”

Commenting on the reading of the Gospel for the Feast of Corpus Christi, which relates the story of the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, in which Jesus feeds a multitude with five loaves of bread and two fish, Pope Francis emphasized, “Jesus asks his disciples that nothing be wasted: nothing wasted! (...) This tells us that when food is shared in a just way, with solidarity, no one is deprived of what is necessary, each community can go beyond itself to encounter the poorest and the neediest.”

5. Conclusion:
We all are the Church, therefore we are all called to work together in meeting our common challenges. If each Catholic, each Pastor, takes seriously the commitment to respect and protect creation, and “to be attentive to all people, in order to counteract the effects of a wasteful, throw-away culture, we will indeed build a culture of solidarity and encounter.” We will make the words we pray so often, “Your Kingdom come”, a real possibility.

This Encyclical is a challenging contribution to serious public debate about the world and the lifestyle that we desire. It is worthwhile to let these written words resonate in us to make us think: “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity. Leaving an inhabitable planet to future generations is, first and foremost, up to us. The issue is one which dramatically affects us, for it has to do with the ultimate meaning of our earthly sojourn.” (# 160).

It is in these probing questions that Pope Francis situates himself in the encyclical “Laudato si...” which is a look at all these realities that have only one solution: the recovery of the human being as a son/daughter of God, each son and daughter a servant of – “dominus” – grateful for creation, and who works incessantly to actualize the “Good News” of the Gospel, through an “ethic of solidarity” expressed concretely in the charity we are called to embody. In this way we can be certain that when we enter into the fullness of eternal life, we have left the world in a better condition than when we entered it.

Pope Francis works from the certainty that – more than ever before – we need faith, we need hope, and charity which should fill us with “enthusiasm” (en-theos), and lead us to act in such a way that we carry the God of creation and redemption in our very souls.
“Human ecology” is the response to the issues of globalization and it is a dimension of a new humanism which is called to return the market to its proper place and function, a humanism which can rightfully restore to each human being the “right to dream” and the feeling that his or her “task of living” has truly been worthwhile.

Many Thanks.

Oscar Andrés Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga, sdb
Archbishop of Tegucigalpa
Chicago, Wednesday, September 28th