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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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November 2019

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Some 500 religious leaders and climate scientists recently signed a joint appeal for climate action, noting that “climate change is an ecological and moral emergency that impacts all other aspects of our shared lives and requires us to work together to protect our common home.” This call for action follows the international recognition in the Paris Climate Agreement, ratified in 2015 by 175 countries, of the pending disaster that climate change poses for the planet and its people, especially the poor of all nations. It also emphasizes the need for a cooperative international effort to reduce green-house gases to safeguard the planet and its inhabitants. In this essay, we follow the “see, judge, act” model of Catholic social teaching to explore the issue of ecology and climate change. To analyze and propose responses to this crisis we rely on both Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’* (henceforth LS) and the four sources of ethical knowledge, science, experience, scripture, and tradition. Jeffrey Sachs, one of the world’s leading economists, says of *Laudato si’* that “it inspires in its profundity and *it speaks to our urgent needs* in a very direct way.”

CATHOLIC TEACHING ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Two ethical misperceptions have led to the present ecological crisis. The *first* is relativism, a “disorder which drives one person to take advantage of another, to treat others as mere objects” (LS 123). This relativism extends to the environment, which humans treat as a mere object to satisfy their own immediate needs, with no care

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or concern for the environment itself. Pope Francis emphatically asserts this disregard, declaring that “the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (LS 2). It “is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth” (LS 21). The *second* ethical misperception is a distorted anthropology, what Francis calls a “misguided anthropocentrism” that “leads to a misguided lifestyle” (LS 122). For Francis, the distortion is an anthropology that replaces creation with human beings as the center of reality. He declares that “when human beings place themselves at the center, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative” (LS 122). Everything that does not serve immediate human needs becomes irrelevant.

The distortion creates separation *not only* between humans and “sisterearth” (LS 1, 2, 53) *but also* between humans themselves. In the economic disparities between developed and developing countries and between the rich and the poor, “some consider themselves more human than others, as if they had been born with greater rights” (LS 90). Such an anthropology violates proper relationships between humans and sister earth and between neighbors and the poor who suffer the most from the devastating consequences of climate change. It also denies the proper relationship between us and God, denying that we are not absolute but creatures created by, and in the image of, God. The implications of relativism and misguided anthropocentrism lead to ethical norms that disregard the common good and focus on fulfilling only immediate personal desires and needs (LS 123). To correct these foundational ethical misperceptions, we must embrace a perspective that recognizes “objective truths” and “sound principles” (LS 123). We must foster an anthropology that recognizes that “there can be no ecology without an adequate anthropology” (LS 118). We must embrace an “integral ecology” (LS 137) that recognizes that everything and everyone is interrelated. In this essay we propose a *two-fold* approach for analyzing and evaluating the ecological crisis; the “see, judge, act” method of Catholic social teaching *and* a virtuous perspective that begins with ecological conversion.

The ecological perspective of a faith that sees the injustice of the ecological crisis and seeks to establish justice aligns well with the “see, judge, act” method of pastoral reflection initiated by Pope John XXIII. The perspective allows Christians first to *see* injustice at the root of the ecological crisis, to *judge* that injustice, and to *act* to establish justice in light of that judgment. To guide us in this method, we propose “ecological virtues,” first and foremost the virtue of ecological conversion. Francis notes that many otherwise prayerful Christians often ridicule concern for the environment

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and do nothing to change their habits to live out their Christian faith consistently. He calls all of us, to “ecological conversion, whereby the effects of encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in our relationship with the world around us. *Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue*; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience” (LS 217 emphasis added).

ECOLOGICAL CONVERSION

Pope John Paul II introduced the term “ecological conversion” into official Church teaching, intending by the term increased sensitivity to the ecological disaster confronting humanity. Pope Francis also focuses on the need for ecological conversion in our relationship with and attitude towards our environment. To understand ecological conversion, we must first understand ecology. The term derives from the Greek *oikos*-home, as in *Laudato si*’s subtitle, *On Care for Our Common Home*, but it has both a narrow biological and a broader theological meaning. *Biologically*, it designates the interrelationship between all natural organisms, including humans, and their environment. *Theologically*, it acknowledges the environment as God’s creation and calls for humans to care for it, guided by the ecological virtues of gratitude and love for creation, solidarity in and mutual responsibility for our common home, and justice for all who share it, especially for the poor and vulnerable who are always the most damaged when creation is damaged. For Francis, ecological conversion calls for a recognition that creation is God’s loving gift, and that we are called to imitate his generosity in caring for it. Ecological conversion entails an awareness that humans are not disconnected from the rest of creation but are inseparably joined to it and in it in intimate communion. By developing our individual, God-given capacities, ecological conversion can inspire us to greater enthusiasm for resolving climate problems (LS 220).

Conversion, turning away from sin, including the sin of exploiting our God-created environment-home, is at the very core of Christian theology. Religious conversion is falling in love with God. It calls us to fall in love, not only with God but also with God’s creation, to love and care for it, and to recognize and repent “our errors, sins, faults and failures” (LS 218). Ecological conversion is a dimension of Christian faith, a specific conversion to creation. The ultimate goal, Francis teaches, is to be so converted that “we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures but joined in a splendid universal communion” (LS 220). Conversion always reshapes how we see, judge, and act. In the climate crisis under

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discussion, we must always be aware how easy it is to be distracted from the love of God and God's creation by self-love and the selfish use of creation for our own exclusive benefit.

SEE

The Catholic Church has an abysmal record of integrating scientific knowledge into its understanding of reality. We need only look to its seventeenth-century condemnation of Galileo for defending Copernicus' heliocentric model of the solar system or the nineteenth-century rejection of science in Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*. More recently, a greater respect for science has been promoted by Popes John Paul II and Francis. John Paul highlights the need for intense dialogue between science and theology. Theology and science, he teaches, must enter into a "common interactive relationship" in which each discipline is "open to the discoveries and insights of the other." Francis advocates "an intense dialogue between science and religion" (*LS* 62). *Laudato si's* use of science in its exploration of environmental questions is unprecedented in Church documents. Specifically, it draws from the science of climate change and presents a harsh but accurate indictment of the current situation: a "throwaway culture" is turning the earth into a pile of "rubbish" (*LS* 22).

The scientific evidence for climate change and global warming is undeniable. There is overwhelming consensus among climate scientists (97%) that global warming is occurring and that humans are responsible for it. Climate scientists emphasize the need for public policy to shift from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy such as sun, wind, and water. Environmentalist Bill McKibben judges that "We're a long way down the path to disastrous global warming, and the policy response has been pathetically underwhelming." Given the overwhelming scientific evidence for climate change and its disastrous impacts, we ask what accounts for the lack of leadership among policy makers to address this crisis?

JUDGE

Religious and ecological conversions give us the insight and courage to ask difficult questions about our relationship with our environment. When addressing environmental ethics in general, and climate change in specific, ethical method may select all *four* sources of ethical knowledge and prioritize them in the following order, science, experience, tradition, and scripture. This prioritization of the sources is not a general ranking of their

importance but a ranking of importance for the particular issue of ecological ethics.

Ethical method must consult *science* to reach a scientifically-informed understanding of the actual and projected threat of climate change. There is indisputable scientific evidence that climate change is occurring, that the actions of humans significantly contribute to it, and that, if nothing is done to address it in the near future, the consequences for humanity, again especially for the poor, will be catastrophic. Science, however, Pope Francis notes, cannot provide a complete explanation of life; it must be complemented with other sources of ethical knowledge (*LS* 199). Based on scientific data and widespread experience, the teaching of recent Popes affirms that climate change and global warming are real and calls for the international community, especially wealthier nations that can really make substantial reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions, to work towards reducing these emissions. The Pontifical Academy of Sciences called “on all people and nations to recognize the serious and potentially irreversible impacts of global warming caused by emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants, and by changes in forests, wetlands, and grasslands.” It appealed to all nations to develop and implement, without delay, effective policies to reduce the causes and impacts of climate change on ecosystems and communities. By acting now, the Academy said, in the spirit of shared responsibility, we accept our duty to one another and to the care of our planet.

Fifty years ago, historian Lynn White already recognized the ecological crisis and explored the interpretations of the creation stories in Genesis as a *partial* cause. *Laudato si'* also focuses on those creation stories (*LS* 65-75). In Genesis, God creates human beings on the sixth day and gives them “dominion (*radah*) over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on earth” (Gen. 1:28). The Hebrew verb *radah* has both a strong sense, “subdue, rule over,” and a weaker sense, “govern.” The strong sense of *radah* emphasizes humans’ dominion over creation and justifies their exploitation of it. Pope Francis teaches that the strong sense is not the correct interpretation of *radah*. The *weaker* sense interprets it as humans caring for creation, and the scientific evidence that illuminates the damage humans have done to the environment justifies the weaker sense of *radah* over the stronger. Throughout *Laudato si'* Francis prefers the term *care*, for the environment, for the neighbor, for the vulnerable, and for the health of all. The four sources of ethical knowledge combine to create a Christian perspective to judge the current ecological crisis and to act to correct it.

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ACT

Moral conversion opens a virtuous pathway for ecological conversion. The moral shift from self-satisfaction to objective value enables one, first, to *see* injustice and, then, to *act* to redress it. A major human value is the human dignity of each and every person; a second is the value of all creatures (plants and animals) that have “value in themselves” (*LS* 33); and a third is a healthy interrelationship between them all. Humans, other creatures, and their shared environment are all being negatively impacted by climate change that yields changes in weather patterns that, in turn, impact crop and food production and cause more frequent and more severe storms and rising sea levels. Both scientific research and everyday experience show that the direst effects on the environment are suffered by the world’s poorest. Moral conversion calls for virtues like love and care for every human being, especially the poor and vulnerable, for all of God’s creatures, for their responsible and healthy relationship, and for corrective and preventive measures to protect their environment. We choose at this point to emphasize especially the gospel virtues of love for all our environmental neighbors and justice for all of them, for our well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of the whole planet.

Focusing on the *virtue of care*, *Laudato si’* addresses the need to protect and preserve vital values, especially the human dignity of the poor who suffer the most from any environmental damage. The twin assaults on vital human values, climate change and environmental pollution, cause numerous health hazards and millions of premature deaths across the world (*LS* 20). They also cause the extinction of plants and animals, which unbalances the ecosystem on which all life depends (*LS* 36). “Because all creatures are connected, each must be cherished with love and respect, for all of us as living creatures are dependent on one another.” (*LS* 42). When this relationship is threatened, as it is currently threatened by climate change, humans can attempt to compensate for the imbalance through science and technology, but these interventions often have their own negative effects on our ecology. A just response to protect vital values must be two-fold. Humans must immediately cease their assault on the environment with pollution and toxic waste and they must allow it to heal with scientific solutions that do not further destabilize an already unstable ecosystem. This requires national and international cooperation and planning to address very complex issues.

Social values, like the good order of the whole community, take precedence over any individualistic values of members within

the community. This is the *common good* argument of Catholic social thought, “the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26; *LS* 156). Francis declares that “climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all” (*LS* 23). Human dignity is foundational to the common good, but it can be realized fully only in relationships that put restraints on what any individual can demand of the community. The realization of social values requires the prioritization of community *over* individualistic values or desires. Too often, individualism shapes culture and promotes a distorted prioritization of the relationship between individual and community. This distorted prioritization of individual over community, individual profit over societal preservation and sustainability, has contributed greatly to the ecological crisis we now face. The economy, and those who have the power to shape it, “accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potentially negative impact on human beings” (*LS* 109). The prioritization of profit, and those who benefit from profit, over the common good and protecting the environment, demand moral conversion. Such conversion, in turn, demands “profound changes in lifestyles, models of production and consumption, and the established structures of power which today govern societies” (*LS* 5). There must be moral conversion *individually, socially, and politically*. Each individual human being is called to embrace a simpler life in the manner of St. Francis of Assisi (*LS* 10), for whom “less is more” (*LS* 222), or, in the manner of Mahatma Gandhi, who famously invited women and men to “live simply so that others can simply live.” “If everything is related, then the health of a society’s institutions has consequences for the environment and the quality of human life. ‘Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment’. In this sense, social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national and international communities” (*LS* 142).

The virtues guiding the common good include solidarity and justice, the “firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” and, we add, to God’s creation in which all neighbors live.

SOLIDARITY AND SUBSIDIARITY

All are called to be in solidarity with both sister earth, which Francis declares to be “among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (*LS* 2), and the actual poor whom he describes as suffering most from the devastating effects of climate change (*LS* 132) and

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who suffer the injustice of an unjust distribution of the world's goods (*LS* 152, 232). Christians are all aware of their summons to adhere to Jesus' great commandment to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). One way to love God concretely and effectively, we suggest, is to love and care for his creation; and one way to love our neighbors as ourselves concretely is to love and care for their creation-*oikos*-home. We must be careful here that we do not love and care for the poor and vulnerable only by giving alms for their support. We must certainly do that, but we must also seek to raise them out of their poverty. The principle of subsidiarity prescribes that a community of a higher order should not deprive a community of a lower order of its proper functions, but rather it should support it, always with a view to the common good. The ecological crisis we have been discussing is a clear case in which the less powerful societies among the nations of the earth are helpless before the crisis and desperately need the help of the more powerful societies to resolve it. It is also a clear case for the conversion of the unjust social structures that are controlled by the political and economic elites (*LS* 196).

Another way in which all individuals can concretely and effectively exercise solidarity and subsidiarity is by pressuring institutions, like local, national, and international businesses, to divest from technologies and fossil fuels that are known to harm the environment. Pope Francis wisely counsels that "caring for ecosystems demands far-sightedness, since no one looking for quick and easy profit is truly interested in their preservation" (*LS* 36). Contrary to the obvious common good, "many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms" (*LS* 26). For Aristotle, virtuous leaders create virtuous communities. Jewish communities are created and sustained by virtuous prophets like Moses; New Testament communities are created and sustained by the paradigmatic virtuous prophet, Jesus the Christ.

Our present culture tends towards the denial of the existence of any divine ground of being, meaning, and value. For *Christians* who are religiously converted, however, divine meanings and values are incarnated in Jesus whom they confess as Son of God, and whom they profess to follow. The meanings and values embodied in him, they believe, are to be embodied also in them. For Christians, therefore, the search for meaning, value, and direction in life, is simple, follow Jesus who claimed to be "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). When human beings place themselves at the

center, Francis teaches, “they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative. Hence, we should not be surprised to find the rise of a relativism which sees everything as irrelevant unless it serves one’s own immediate interests” (*LS* 122). When Christians imitate the meanings and values embodied in Jesus, they are living by meanings and values more than sufficient to resolve every human crisis, anthropological or ecological. Every virtue is a personal habit or disposition ordered to an act; the virtue of justice is ordered to acts of justice, the virtue of love is ordered to acts of love. We now underscore the single virtue that should characterize Christians, namely, faith in Jesus that leads to the conviction that following him in all things will enable them to resolve every human crisis. “Only by cultivating sound Christian virtues,” Francis asserts, “will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment” (*LS* 211).

Among the virtues that comprise a virtuous ecological perspective are especially prudence, responsibility, courage, honesty, care, faith, hope, love, solidarity, subsidiarity, and reconciliation, all of which pervade *Laudato si’*. Though we have focused on ecological conversion to address the ecological crisis and to guide the “see, judge, act” ethical method of Catholic social teaching, Pope Francis has recourse to other virtues that complement conversion and highlight the radical response individuals and local, national, and international communities must take to address the crisis. “Various convictions of our faith,” Francis teaches, “can help us to enrich the meaning of this [ecological] conversion.... Then too, there is the recognition that God created the world, writing into it an order and a dynamism that human beings have no right to ignore.” We read in the Gospel, he continues, “that Jesus says of the birds of the air that ‘not one of them is forgotten before God’ (*Lk* 12:6). How then can we possibly mistreat them or cause them harm?” He concludes his encyclical with a heartfelt plea: “I ask all Christians to recognize and to live fully this dimension of their conversion. In this way, we will help nurture that sublime fraternity with all creation which Saint Francis of Assisi so radiantly embodied” (*LS* 221).