

Stewardship of Creation

Commentary

Virtue: The Hidden Foundation of *Laudato Si*

By Leah Miller



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critique of an economic system that encourages waste and environmental abuse.

But while it's true that Pope Francis was looking to inspire political change with his encyclical, we do a disservice to ourselves—and to our planet—if we think our current ecological problems can be solved with a few new laws and government programs. That's because our abuse of the environment isn't due to a lack of legal guidance; it's due to a faulty moral compass.

Fortunately, our Holy Father gets this, and he provides a solid foundation for restoring our relationship with creation, a foundation that most accounts of *Laudato Si* have glossed over: a foundation based on virtue.

"Only by cultivating sound virtues will people be able to make a selfless ecological commitment." (LS §211)

The Catechism tells us that a virtue, in short, is "an habitual and firm disposition to do good." Following Pope Francis' lead, let's take a look at how the four cardinal virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude enable us to live in right relationship with God's creation.

Justice

Justice means giving someone or something what they're due. In an environmental context, this fundamentally means treating our world—created by a loving God and given to us to till and keep—with the reverence and gratitude it deserves. This virtue should also guide farmers' actions in the marketplace, ensuring that employees are paid a just wage and products are sold at a fair price.

Prudence

Prudence enables us to properly order competing goods, and to know how to go about achieving the right

solution. This virtue is especially relevant in environmental debates concerning agricultural technologies, such as GMOs. Yes GMOs help us grow food more efficiently, but is this plus worth the long-term threat to biological diversity and smaller farm operations? Cultivating prudence will help us sort out these tricky scenarios.

Temperance

Temperance is all about self-regulation. We can see how this applies to individuals' lives, for instance, in cutting down rampant consumption habits that are unhealthy for both the body and the planet. But it also applies to how we interact with creation. In agriculture, we need to make sure that we're tempering our operations, not allowing them to get to a scale where they do more to harm the common good than to advance it.

Fortitude

Let's be honest. The temptation to exploit the planet—and our fellow man—for our own gain is ever present. Fortitude is the virtue that allows us to persevere in what is right, even in the face of the lure of wealth or convenience. Living in right relationship with God's creation isn't easy, especially in this day and age. But if we cultivate fortitude, we as individuals and societies can willingly endure the short-term sacrifices needed for long-term sustainability.

Faith, Hope and Charity

Of course, if we're really going to make a "selfless ecological commitment," we need to cultivate the supernatural virtues as well. We need *Faith* to know and believe that God gave us this earth and wants us to use it responsibly and reverently; *Hope* to increase our desire to love God in all things, our interactions with the environment included; and *Charity* to compel us to follow through on this desire by caring for creation with justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude. This is the foundation of *Laudato Si*, and this vision of virtue, coupled with sound law and policy, is what is needed to restore a right relationship with the earth.

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