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"THAT THEY ALL MAY BE ONE"

A Virtuous Community, a Paradigm for Environmental Sustainability

Abundio R. Babor, Jr., M.S.C.

Abstract. The impact of human actions on the environment has created a myriad of problems. We need a moral paradigm that can facilitate an essential and substantial transformation to recover the bond between one another in the common home. Communal and environmental sustainability happens when human beings in the community live prudently, justly, steadfastly, and moderately with faith, hope, and charity.

A virtuous community focused on the habitual practice of the virtues sustains the environment because when human beings treat each other prudently, justly, steadfastly, and moderately with faith, hope, and charity, they act in the same manner toward non-human species. In a virtuous community, human actions are not motivated by dysfunctional anthropocentric desires but by the concern to care for all species.

The habitual practice of the virtues is the moral expression of our love of God and neighbor (Mk. 12:30–31), of living out God's vision of a right relationship based on communion with all of God's creation on this planet.

Keywords. creation; instrinsic value; dysfunctional anthropocentrism

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The environmental crisis challenges us to explore possibilities that give us a better grasp of what we ought to do. Finding the appropriate paradigm is crucial. Sustainable development, as examined, is based on the fundamental premise that it is possible to manage environmental problems, challenging as they may be, and that the environment can be significantly adjusted by human ingenuity and utilized more efficiently for sustained economic growth.[1] From this perspective, the solutions to environmental problems are focused mainly on economic and technological interventions. Yet this approach has proven to be inadequate and inherently problematic.[2] The effort to palliate human impacts rather than probe and address underlying causes leads only to short-term solutions.

In this conversation, this author proposes that we take on the "virtuous community" as a paradigm for environmental sustainability. It offers a radical long-term approach to the problem of environmental degradation because it tries to address the roots of the problem. A human community rooted in the Christian virtues focuses primarily on having the right relationship with one another and the environment. It integrates views of the world, interconnectedness with each species, and the community's place in the web of life. An ecological relationship is proper when human persons deal with each other as subjects and

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[1] World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 49. This assertion is continually challenged by young environmental activists like Greta Thunberg. In her speech at the United Nations Climate Action Summit in 2019, she said,

> You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words, and yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

The speech may be viewed at https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/read-greta-thunberg-s-full-speech-united-nations-climate-action-n1057861.

[2] A. Babor, "A Bucket Half Empty: A Critique of the Notion of Sustainable Development as a Paradigm for Environmental Sustainability," *Landas* 33:2 (2019): 90.

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when they treat other species as an integral part of their whole being. It eliminates the perception of (subject-object)[3] separation between individuals, the human community and non-human species, economic and moral aspects, and spiritual and physical dimensions, among others. It helps overcome the environmental crisis by motivating each individual to reach wholeness, which is needed for communal and ecological sustainability. This sense of wholeness finds meaning in what Jesus said in John 17:21: "That They All May Be One."[4]

[3] Martin Buber's "I-It" and "I-Thou" framework is useful for this study. Since the Industrial Revolution, the environment had become an object to be exploited by human beings for economic profit (I-It). The expansion of industrial technology largely prevented humanity from respecting the environment as more than just a standing economic reserve. Buber's I-Thou framework helps us to recover respect for the environment since the latter is not an object to be exploited but a subject, a part of our being. In "I-Thou," there is a relationship of mutuality based on the principle of respect. See M. Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, 1970), 15–42.

[4] The text is part of Jesus's prayer for his disciples before his passion. He prayed for his disciples to be united just as he and the Father are one with the Holy Spirit. The Trinitarian mystery revealed by Jesus in his prayer for his disciples is a powerful reference for our ecological vision. All beings in the ecosystem, both human and non-human, are to find unity as everything comes from the Creator, God, the Trinity. Moreover, Jesus's prayer also discloses the context of the disciples' unity. Jesus prays to the Father that his disciples be in the world (not be taken out of the world). It implies the exigency of the disciples' unity in the concrete experiences of life. The task requires living a virtuous life as cultivating the habit of the moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude, sustained by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, can overcome "otherness." A virtuous life gives the fruit of unity. In this line of thought, the text provides the epitome of an ecological vision where the distinction between human and non-human no longer exists. Everything becomes interconnected and interrelated which, after all, is God's plan for all God's creation.

All Biblical quotations in this paper are taken from the Catholic Edition of the Revised Standard Version (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1966).

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The Christian Virtues

The Christian virtues provide profound conditions for environmental sustainability. The cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, along with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity,[5] enable us to live according to God's plan. Jesus's incisive point, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mk. 12:30), emphasizes our fundamental interconnectedness with our creator and God's creation. God, the creator of everything, should be the ground of our being and the habitual focus of all relationships in both human and non-human dimensions.[6] In other words, loving God and God's creation has to become the consistent orientation of our being and character, an awareness that everything exists for God and one another within the whole ecosystem, that in God, "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

The problem of "otherness" can be overcome when we understand that our interconnectedness defines who we are and everything we do. Loving all of God's creation demands living a virtuous life (prudently, justly, steadfastly, and moderately with faith, hope, and love). We ought to focus on what links us rather than what disconnects us. The epitome of love, the Incarnate Word, the "Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14), became one like us because God "so loved the world" (cf. Jn. 3:16).

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[5] The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the theological virtues as

> the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as [God's] children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Manila: Word and Life Publications/CBCP/ECCE, 1994], no. 1813; hereafter referred to as CCC).

[6] See W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 155.

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The Moral Virtue of Prudence

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the virtue of prudence as

> the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.… It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting the rule and measures. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience.[7]

Regarded as the mother of all moral virtues, prudence is also called practical reason[8] because it involves what the individual wants to do and how to do it correctly. For St. Thomas Aquinas, prudence is the habit of being judicious.[9] Exercising the moral virtue of prudence, however, involves several steps. First, it demands that the person who will do the action should be careful in choosing the means of acting through moral deliberation. Second, the moral agent has to form a sound judgment. Third, the person has to command correctly.[10]

Moral deliberation, which is finding the method suitable for attaining a particular objective, comes from inquiry. The good of the individual and the planetary community is always considered in moral deliberation. Indeed, St. Thomas argued that attaining the individual's good is not possible unless the common good of others is taken into account.[11] Therefore, the prudent individual makes a reasonable judgment by considering what is good for oneself and others. The

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[7] CCC no. 1806.

[8] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Vol. III, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1981), II-II, Q. 47, a. 1. Hereafter referred to as ST.

[9] ST II-II, Q. 47, a. 1.

[10] J. Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 232.

[11] ST II-II, Q. 47, a. 8.

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execution or command, the third step in prudent decision-making, has three essential elements: anticipation, cautiousness, and attentiveness.[12] The individual anticipates that what is being deliberated upon will last for present and future generations and is cautious in finding the proper way to attain the goal of the action while considering potentially interfering circumstances. Lastly, by being attentive, the individual is cautious in discerning between good and evil.[13]

By applying the practice of the moral virtue of prudence for environmental sustainability, the individual and the community consistently ensure that everything will be in harmony and that the planet's ecosystem will last for future generations. Being morally aware of the means suitable for preserving environmental sustainability, everyone exercises caution by avoiding what is detrimental to the environment, e.g., overconsumption of the planet's resources, irresponsible garbage disposal, etc.

The Moral Virtue of Justice

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the virtue of justice as

> the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the "virtue of religion." Justice toward [women and men] disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and the common good.[14]

The virtue of justice is essential for a sustainable planet because justice is the recognition that each part of a complex system of the environment—the human community and the different species/organisms in nature—has a particular role in sustaining the whole ecosystem. Jame Schaefer points out that Aquinas argued that justice predisposes the individual human person to relate favorably with

[12] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 233.

[13] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 233.

[14] CCC no. 1807.

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others in the community to attain the *temporal* common good while they seek out the *eternal* common good with God.[15] Since everyone in the community is uniquely interconnected as part of the whole, the individual good contributes to the community's common good.[16] It is understood that everyone in the community should have enough resources to sustain themselves. It means that the moral virtue of justice must guide everyone in using the planet's resources so that all species can provide for their needs and no one is disadvantaged.

Aquinas's point on the moral virtue of justice is very relevant in arguing for a sustainable planet. Justice directs our rationality to use the world's goods in ways that ensure the planet's survival for future generations. The virtue of justice urges human beings—both individually and as a community—to use environmental resources only for what is necessary for the flourishing of every species and not according to the excessive consumption that characterizes today's society.[17]

The Moral Virtue of Fortitude

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the virtue of fortitude as

> the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice [her or his] life in defense of a just cause.[18]

The virtue of fortitude is synonymous with courage. It can be described as persistence, determination, and firmness of the will. A

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[15] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 234.

[16] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 234.

[17] Pope Francis argues strongly about this point in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* (Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2015), no. 160.

[18] CCC no. 1808.

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sustainable world demands that everyone persevere in living a simple lifestyle and not give in to the vice of excessive consumption which is destructive for the environment. The moral virtue of fortitude strengthens justice to predispose human beings individually and communally to commit to looking after the good of other species by nurturing the planet.[19] It also reinforces the virtue of temperance so that the community will use environmental resources only for what is necessary for human and other species' flourishing rather than for satisfying the vices of selfishness and greed.[20]

When the practice of the moral virtue of fortitude becomes habitual, everyone acquires a particular attitude of perseverance in the minimal usage of environmental resources to ensure the planet's equilibrium.

The Moral Virtue of Temperance

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines the virtue of temperance as

> the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good.…[21]

The moral virtue of temperance enables one to focus on having restraint from wanting to have more, recognizing that there are values higher than the immediate satisfaction of temporal and material desires. In practicing temperance, the community attains a sense of contentment and the desire to want no more than what the community already has. Thus, it urges everyone to control irrational wants and passions that cause planetary disharmony.[22]

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[19] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 235.

[20] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 235.

[21] CCC no. 1809.

[22] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 232.

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According to Schaefer, Aquinas emphasized that God intends for the environment's resources to serve as means for sustaining human life while human beings aim, ultimately, to have eternal happiness with God. Thus, the individual and the community should not take disproportionate pleasure in material things because these will distract them from their path toward fullness of life in God.[23]

The virtue of temperance is vital for a sustainable planet because everyone would refrain from the vices of greed and self-indulgence. In other words, temperance would direct community members to cultivate and nurture self-restraint because the vice of avarice in possessing the environment's resources would be seen as contrary to union with God. After all, the ultimate goal is not happiness in possessing material things but eternal happiness with God. Thus, disproportionate living standards are ruled out in any circumstance to avoid diverting the focus of the individual and the community from the ultimate goal of attaining eternal bliss with God.

The Theological Virtue of Faith

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines faith as

> the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that [God] has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because [God] is truth itself. By faith "[the human person] freely commits [her or his] entire self to God." For this reason, the believer seeks to know and do God's will.[24]

Faith is a theological virtue that leads us to believe in God and commit ourselves entirely to God and God's purpose for all beings in the environment. It is not merely an agreement with a precept but, more broadly, about commitment and engagement to do God's will. As a theological virtue, it forms our moral conscience and entails belief in the goodness of God and God's creation.

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[23] Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics*, 233.

[24] CCC no. 1814.

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The theological virtue of faith requires a particular commitment to respond to the attitudes of human beings toward God's creation. It demands ecological conversion that calls for repentance, discipline, and self-sacrifice. The Greek words for conversion (*metanoein* and *epistrephein*) mean "to turn around."[25] Conversion means turning around, going in a different direction, and making a new start. In other words, the old values and habits are left behind as the new path is set. As the Sacred Scriptures tell us, "the former things have passed away.… Behold, I make all things new" (cf. Rev. 21:4–5).

Human beings must recognize that the obsession for economic growth and development at the expense of the planet's subsistence is wrong and that repentance is necessary. Repentance is the first step toward conversion. Repentance means to challenge the past and correct it.[26] When repentance leads to conversion, the economic paradigm is replaced with communion. Communion in the community and with the environment means no social and environmental injustice, no obsession with economic growth and development, and no undue consumption. There is respect for the intrinsic value of each person in the community and of the different species of this planet.

The theological virtue of faith aligns our desires and inclinations with what is good for the environment and the community. It enables us to nurture one another and the environment because we see our interconnectedness and interdependence.

The Theological Virtue of Hope

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines hope as

> the theological virtue by which we desire the Kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises

[25] O. Costas, "Conversion as a Complex Experience: A Personal Case Study," in J. Stott & R. Coote, eds., *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 35–36.

[26] W. Conn, ed., *Conversion: Perspectives on Personal and Social Transformation* (New York: Alba House, 1978), 24–32.

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> and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.… The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every [woman and man]; it takes up the hopes that inspire [women's and men's] activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps [women and men] from discouragement; it sustains [them] during times of abandonment; it opens up [their hearts] in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, [women and men are] preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity.[27]

The theological virtue of hope is understood primarily as reliance and trust that God will complete God's plan for humanity and the world. The Old Testament uses the meaning of hope as searching for "refuge in God … trusting confidently in God to fulfil the promises of blessing, and waiting patiently on God to accomplish God's plans."[28]

The individual and the community hold on to hope because God is faithful to God's promises. As human beings, our capacity to hope is one of the most important things that distinguishes us from other species on this planet. Aquinas stressed that hope is central to our Christian life because God is its efficient cause and object.[29] In his view, the ultimate object of hope is the joy of union with God.[30] Hope can lead the individual and the community to act in accordance with virtue and godliness.[31]

As a theological virtue for a sustainable planet, hope is the habit of looking at the future good as an eschatological reality. Hope allows us to affirm that God's creation is good and that humankind is an integral part of creation's flourishing. Thus, we can hope for the restoration of everything that is good in creation. We can hope that all species

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[27] CCC nos. 1817–1818.

[28] H. Cohen, *Reason and Hope*, trans. E. Jospe (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), 122–128.

[29] ST II-II, Q. 17, a. 1, 5, 6.

[30] ST II-II, Q. 17, a. 2–4.

[31] ST II-II, Q. 20, a 3.

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will thrive on this planet. With the virtue of hope, there is a moral conviction that God intends the well-being of everything God has created. We rely on God's infinite power, which exists entirely beyond the grasp of our limited understanding and finite experience.

The Theological Virtue of Charity

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines charity as "the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for [God's] own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God."[32]

Aquinas calls the theological virtue of charity "the mother of the other virtues."[33] Charity is properly understood in the context of faith and hope. It can be said that faith precedes hope because faith provides the knowledge that arouses hope for the things we have to know. Hope comes before charity because hope desires the goal which charity attains. Thus, the nature of charity is to fulfill the works of faith and hope. Charity directs faith and hope toward God. It embodies the union of God with all of God's creation in the ecosystem.

Agapé, the Greek word for charity, means unconditional commitment to another.[34] It does not depend on any action or quality of the beloved. God loves all God's creation without conditions. Human beings are called to love in the same way. "We love because God first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19).

For a sustainable planet, loving everything God has created demands that we pay careful attention to everything affected by environmental degradation. Preventing the rise of seawater levels caused by climate change would express love for the highly vulnerable who happen to be the poor and marginalized living along coastlines. Preventing toxic waste from seeping into an aquifer expresses love for all organisms

[32] CCC no. 1822.

[33] ST II-II, Q. 23, a. 8.

[34] See J. Nollman, *Spiritual Ecology: A Guide for Reconnecting with Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 87–89.

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nourished by water. Indeed, the theological virtue of charity enables us to love God and all God's creation on this planet—our home.[35]

The Basic Ecclesial Community[36]

Having discussed the seven Christian virtues, we must demonstrate that a virtuous community is possible for environmental sustainability. The Basic Ecclesial Community in the Philippines is thus considered as a case in point. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines defines the Basic Ecclesial Community as composed of

> small communities of Christians, usually of families, who gather around the Word of God and the Eucharist. These communities are united to their pastors but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name and share the Word of God and the Eucharist and their concerns, both material and spiritual. They have a strong sense of belongingness and responsibility for one another.[37]

The description explains the meaning of the three words: *Basic*, *Ecclesial*, and *Community*. The word *Basic* refers to the community's size and social location.[38] As Amado Picardal explains, "a basic community is small enough for the members to know each other well and relate deeply as friends but not too small that it turns into a primary group or *barkada* (peer group) instead of a community."[39] The members may

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[35] Pope Francis calls the planet our home in *Laudato Si'*.

[36] There are other groups/communities we can consider as well: non-government organizations, corporations, schools, etc. For the purpose of this research, the Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) is considered as a case in point. The hope, however, is that the application of the moral and theological virtues to the BEC for environmental sustainability can also be done for other groups.

[37] *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines Secretariat, 1992), 138. Hereafter referred to as PCP II.

[38] PCP II, 138.

[39] PCP II, 138.

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be composed of forty to two hundred families and subdivided into different cells or groupings of five to ten families each. As a social location, the members are at the grassroots or considered to be a simple group of people living together as a community.

The word *Ecclesial*, on the other hand, stresses the notion that the Basic Ecclesial Community is how the Church lives its mission. Under the principle of subsidiarity, the Church is being "realized, localized and experienced at the grassroots, in the neighbourhood."[40] As communities, they serve as a microcosm of the Church, not as administrative units within the parish structure.

The term *Community* means that the members of the Basic Ecclesial Community live as a community. They are not merely a group or an association but a community whose members live in close proximity to each other and interact regularly. The mandated organizations in the parish (Catholic Women's League, Knights of Columbus, Legion of Mary, etc.) and renewal movements (Couples For Christ, Neo-Catechumenate, El Shaddai, etc.) are not considered Basic Ecclesial Communities because these are specialized groups with a specific orientation.[41]

A Virtuous Community

A formation program centered on the environment and based on the virtues can be designed to help the Basic Ecclesial Community become a virtuous community.[42] Becoming prudent, just, courageous, and moderate while grounded in faith, hope, and love of God and

[40] PCP II, 138.

[41] PCP II, 138.

[42] This author designed a sample parish formation program titled "Basic Ecclesial Community Formation Program for a Sustainable Community." A copy is available at http://bit.ly/BECFORMATIONPROG. The author may also be reached at ababor@lst.edu.

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all that exists in the ecosystem ensures the sustainability of our common home.

Living Prudently

The virtue of prudence that the Basic Ecclesial Community cultivates as a habit can help each member discern how to respond appropriately to the environmental crisis. They come to know the facts and choose the means of acting in light of the social teachings of the Church. The principle of subsidiarity is very relevant in this regard. The Basic Ecclesial Community assumes responsibility for the care of all, and everyone can participate in the communal decision-making.

Individually and as a community, the members will use available sources of information on possible strategies for action to form a sound judgment regarding the best means for stopping or at least minimizing environmental degradation. In forming a sound judgment, the members can discern how the needs of individual members and the community can be met without damaging the environment. The members will recognize that environmental balance is essential for the well-being of all that exists in the ecosystem.

By considering sustainability, the members become morally conscientious about using the resources of the environment responsibly, considering not only their individual needs but also the needs of others in the community and the next generation. As prudent members of the Basic Ecclesial Community, they exercise their foresight in discerning the appropriate means for safeguarding the common good to provide for the necessities of life that will sustain the environment. As prudent human beings, they do not see a dichotomy between themselves and the environment, their economic and social concerns, and the spiritual and moral aspects of their lives because their practice of the virtue of prudence allows them to reach the level of wholeness with one another and interconnectedness with the environment. They understand their proper place in the whole web of life.

The prudent members of the Basic Ecclesial Community know that their destiny is connected with the fate of other species. They

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become deeply engrossed in their faith that it is God, not humankind, who owns the earth. They do their part, therefore, to minimize carbon emissions by using alternative means of transport such as biking. They plant trees to reforest areas of the country affected by logging. They shield water resources from contamination. They network with other environmental groups to save the coral reefs. They protect the remaining forests and lands from mining. They protest against systemic corruption. They share resources especially with the marginalized members of the community and find ways to alleviate poverty by providing means of stable livelihood.

Living Justly

As members of the Basic Ecclesial Community, the individual and the community live justly because they know the common good is at stake not only for the present generation but also for the next ones. As people who cultivate and practice the moral virtue of justice, they know that the poor and the minorities are more vulnerable to catastrophes such as flooding, landslides due to deforestation, pollutants, toxicants, and hazardous materials due to industrial wastes, rising seawater levels due to climate change, and other devastating human-made calamities. As they strive to promote the common good, they are committed to protesting against environmental and social injustice.

The members of the Basic Ecclesial Community who live justly are not engaged solely in the debate on environmental policies or technological intervention per se but also in nurturing the sense of the sacred for which an incessant preoccupation with economic growth and development is causing a lot of disequilibrium. Forests, water resources, coral reefs, and mineral resources are held in common to be shared not only by those who have power and influence in Philippine society. The overuse and abuse of natural resources are to be avoided, and regulations must be established to prevent manipulation by those in power.

Living in a just way, the members of the Basic Ecclesial Community treat each other fairly. As just people, they will demand compensation for the environmental damage in contaminated areas where toxic

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wastes, for instance, from mining, have destroyed land and water. They will commit not to harm the health and well-being of all. In addition, they will require the cleanup of areas that cause injury to the vulnerable and the powerless. They will become channels for those whose voices cannot be heard, like the Filipino minorities, the poor, and the different species facing extinction.

Being just, the individual and the community will work toward personal and communal flourishing. They will actively participate in God's ongoing creation—beginning with small and communal choices—to build a more just world. They see all people and different species in the environment as members of God's family. They strive to achieve God's vision of harmony and sustainability, of a right relationship with each other and the environment, by giving everyone his or her due, treating each one fairly, and treating them as they really are—God's creation with intrinsic value. Their practice of the moral virtue of justice ensures that all human beings in the present and future will be able to sustain themselves economically, morally, spiritually, socially, and culturally as they aim for the fullness of life in God.

Living Steadfastly

The Basic Ecclesial Community members will become steadfast and courageous in resisting the lures of the excessive desire for luxury and the "throwaway culture"[43] of the present time. They are morally convinced that it is wrong to acquire disproportionate material wealth while others are destitute. By being prudent, they do not waste the natural resources of the environment. They consciously strive to integrate their faith and daily life in solidarity with one another.

In persevering to seek the common good, they maintain a courageous stance even when it is unpopular. Even if their protest seems fruitless against environmental injustice, where the poor suffer

[43] Francis uses the phrase "use and throw away" and its meaning in his discussion on the human roots of the ecological crisis. See Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 123.

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most of the effects of environmental degradation, they persevere quietly and confidently to fight for what is right.

Fortitude or courage is what one lives out in the face of threats and uncertainty. It takes the moral virtue of fortitude to remain strong when one is threatened. It takes fortitude to avoid irrational actions when one is provoked by anger or panic. By their habitual practice of fortitude, the community members are sustained to persevere through difficult times. Since the Basic Ecclesial Community regularly gathers around the Eucharist and shares the word of God (through *"Bibliarasal"—Biblia at Dasal* or *Bible and Prayer*), they do not falter and they remain resolute—even if their actions can put them in uncertain situations—because their moral conviction is sustained by their spiritual life.

The members of the Basic Ecclesial Community can learn from the examples of Filipinos who have sacrificed their lives for the cause of the environment and for the good of others. They can learn from the Filipino environmental martyrs who, in their commitment to protect the planet, have been killed and eliminated, allegedly by plunderers of the environment.[44]

Being steadfast in their moral conviction, however, the community members avoid making harsh judgments or uncontrolled anger. They are strengthened by their use of prudent decision-making to live steadfastly for communal and environmental sustainability.

Living Moderately

In the practice of living the moral virtue of temperance, members of the Basic Ecclesial Community become modest in their use of the

[44] Human Rights Watch in the Philippines has documented a number of cases from 2011 up to the present. The victims were critics of mining and energy projects who were killed allegedly by paramilitary forces directed by the military. They were very active in opposing mining and energy operations which they said threatened the environment and would displace tribal communities from their land. See Human Rights Watch, "Philippines: Killings of Environment Advocates Unpunished" (New York: 2012), available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/07/18/philippines-killings-environment-advocates-unpunished.

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resources of the planet. They develop the ability to control their wants and shun the vice of excessive consumerism. They acquire a sharpened moral consciousness to distinguish needs from wants. They know that the material things parodied as needs by the media lead to undue waste which has environmentally destructive consequences.

Practicing the moral virtue of temperance makes the individual and the community *selfless* rather than *selfish*. By living moderately, the Basic Ecclesial Community members go beyond mere self-preservation; they practice solidarity with one another in the spirit of the common good.

As pointed out by Aquinas, the way to cultivate and practice the moral virtue of temperance is by paying careful attention to natural desires, to consume what we need and not what we want. St. Thomas was emphatic in saying that the virtue of temperance "takes the needs of this life as the rule governing the pleasurable things one uses; namely that one should use them insofar as the needs of this life require their use."[45] As members of the Basic Ecclesial Community, the individual and the community will know how to temper their wants in relation to the needs of others in the community.

Living moderately, the Basic Ecclesial Community members follow the *Sapat* Principles:[46]

1. *Sapat na ang pagkasira ng kalikasan* (There has been enough destruction of the environment).
2. *Sapat lamang ang dapat kunin mula sa kalikasan* (Take from nature only that which is enough).
3. *Sapat lamang ang dapat kanin at bilhin* (Eat and buy only what is enough and needed).

[45] ST II-II, Q. 142, a. 6.

[46] The SAPAT Principles have become a popular slogan among environmentalists in the Philippines. The origin of the concept can be traced to the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, a sisters' congregation with a strong environmental advocacy in their apostolate. See http://www.svdcuria.org/public/jpic/jpichb/jpichben/section1.htm (accessed January 14, 2023).

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4. *Dapat mayroon ang bawat isa ng sapat sa kanyang mga pangangailangan upang mabuhay nang malusog at may dangal* (Each person must have enough to sustain a healthy and dignified life).

Living as Good Stewards with Faith, Hope, and Charity

Infused by God with the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, the members of the Basic Ecclesial Community nurture the sense of the sacred by being good stewards to one another and to non-human species. The community members know that it is their moral responsibility to care for one another and the environment as God loves and cares for them. They understand that this moral responsibility does not grant them the right to dominate other human beings and the environment in a way that is incongruous with God's own manner of governance.

Since the first moment of creation, God has provided for the needs of God's creatures and likewise ordered all of creation for their sustainability. Hence, the individual's and community's moral responsibility for creation must be exercised in accordance with God's vision. The dominion referred to in Gen. 1:26,

> And God said, "Let us make [the human person] in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth"

means responsible *stewardship*. Such stewardship must uphold the common good of all, respecting the intrinsic value and purpose that every creature possesses. If the individual and the community in the Basic Ecclesial Community exercise dominion in ways that destroy the environment, such as contributing to the emission of carbon dioxide, deforestation, irresponsible mining, and the destruction of coral reefs or wasting water resources or committing corruption, such actions constitute an offense against God's original plan for creation.

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In exercising responsible stewardship, the individual and the community are committed to being faithful in doing what God intends for the good of the human community and of other species in the environment. The United States Catholic Conference, in their pastoral statement, rightly pointed out that "as faithful stewards, fullness of life comes from living responsibly within God's creation."[47]

Good stewards do not view creation as something to be abused for the ceaseless pursuit of economic growth and material development. The Basic Ecclesial Community regards God's creation as *oikos*,[48] our home that demands care. As the United States Catholic Conference explained, "human beings bear a unique responsibility before God: to safeguard the created world and by their creative labor should even enhance it."[49]

As rational beings endowed with the creative capacity to participate in God's continuing creative power over the environment, the members of the Basic Ecclesial Community will protect all forms of life on Earth and, at the same time, enhance them in a responsible manner. In this regard, technology should be at the service of responsible stewardship. The members of the Basic Ecclesial Community will not use technology to pursue relentless economic growth by cutting

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[47] United States Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching* (November 14, 1991), III-A.

[48] First used by Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919), the term *ecology* is derived from the Greek *oikos* which means "house" or "place" to live in. Drawing from the literal meaning and inspired by its holistic interpretation, the term has now come to be used with greater profoundness and broadness. Eugene Odum, in his *Fundamentals of Ecology*, describes ecology as the study of organisms "at home" in their interrelatedness. He further notes that the term *ecology* is applied today not only to nature but also to social and cultural attitudes. "Whatever common in these understandings of *ecology*," Odum adds, "is their emphasis on the interconnectedness of the various elements that comprise the world as a whole" (see E. Odum, *Fundamentals of Ecology* 3rd ed. [Philadelphia: Saunders College, 1971], 3).

[49] United States Catholic Conference, *Renewing the Earth*, III-A.

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down more trees, destroying land and forests in search of minerals, polluting rivers and seas, and emitting more carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. They know that they have the power, intelligence, and moral responsibility not to satisfy their greed and selfishness but to nurture and help order the world in accordance with God's plan.[50]

The sense of the sacred by which the Basic Ecclesial Community nurtures communal and environmental sustainability will be sustained by their life of prayer and meditation. Making time for communion with God will offer a way for the individual and the community to slow down the incessant activity of modern lifestyles and awaken the profound connection between the individual, community, and environment with God.[51] The members know that integrating contemplative and ritual practices with environmental activism sustains and deepens their commitment to healing the broken relationship with one another and the environment.[52] They always find strength in their moral commitment to communal and environmental sustainability, for example, by praying constantly the Canticle of St. Francis of Assisi.[53]

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[50] See T. Derr, *Ecology and Human Need* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 122–126.

[51] K. Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (New York: Random House, 1998), 49–52.

[52] Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, 49–52.

[53] E. Armstrong says that the very structure of the Canticle reveals the search for and encounter with overall unity. The number seven in the verses shows the emergence of this deep structure; it is made up of three and four, the greatest symbols of totality and unity. Vertical and horizontal lines cross in the hymn; together, they form a well-known symbol of cosmic totality. The first moment goes upward toward God: *Most high, all-powerful, all good, Lord!* That is the search for transcendence. But then St. Francis becomes aware that he is not succeeding in singing to God alone. He turns to the horizontal dimension where all creatures are, for they speak of God. He opens the horizontal and universal dimensions of kinship. He sings to creatures that bear the likeness of God. It means that if we cannot speak of God, we can speak to creatures who are marked by the sacramentality of God's presence. See E. Armstrong, *Saint Francis, Nature Mystic: The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 152–158.

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A Brief Excursus

One possible criticism against the paradigm of a virtuous community for environmental sustainability is that its framework is obviously anthropocentric. Anthropocentrism is understood as the fundamental emphasis on the primacy of the human species over non-human ones in terms of significance, value, and worth. Human beings tend to assume that everything exists in the ecosystem for human purpose. In this view, *homo sapiens* supposedly holds the central position in the planet's web of life.

Anthropocentrism has long been a problematic notion. It not only established a dualism of human and non-human species but also insisted that it is God's will that the human being exploits nature for his/her proper ends. The medieval historian Lynn White, Jr. accused Christianity, especially in its Western form, of being the most anthropocentric religion the world had ever seen. He pointed out that it had desacralized nature, encouraged its exploitation, and promoted a worldview in which humans are superior to and in charge of the rest of nature.[54]

In *Laudato Si'*, Francis points explicitly to anthropocentrism, especially in its modern form, as the culprit at the root of the complexity of environmental degradation:

> Modern anthropocentrism has paradoxically ended up prizing technical thought over reality, since "the technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere 'given,' as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos similarly as a mere 'space' into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference."[55]

[54] See L. White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," reprinted in D. Van De Veer & C. Pierce, eds., *The Environmental Ethics and Policy Book* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994), 45–51.

[55] Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 115.

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A distinction is necessary for this discourse—while the concept of anthropocentrism per se is morally neutral, its expression can be either good or bad, and it is the latter that has unmistakably been the dominant model of the relationship between the human and non-human throughout history. The appalling consequence of this has been the objectification/abuse of non-human species. Indeed, a lot of ecosystem disharmony and imbalance has been caused by this basic orientation toward the exploitation and manipulation of nature for the benefit of the human species.

Good anthropocentrism is necessary for turning the ecological crisis around. It is based on the life and practice of the virtues. A virtuous individual and community promote nurturance of the planet, not its destruction. If the human species has been the cause of the environmental crisis, it also has the capacity to find solutions for it by living virtuously. Other species by their nature have no faculty to effect change willfully and reasonably. The deer in the forest does not know why the forest is gone; the human species knows that irresponsible logging, mining, or other destructive human activities are to blame. The deer does not know how to bring the forest back; the human species knows that the forest can be recovered by planting trees. While this may appear to be a simplistic illustration, it drives home the point that it is the human species that has the capacity to correct what is wrong.

A much deeper understanding of good anthropocentrism lies in the claim that there is intrinsic value in all that exists in the ecosystem. Drawing on the fundamental premise that everything in this planet has intrinsic value emanating from God, the paradigm of a virtuous community argues that the flourishing of non-human species and that of human beings are fundamentally intertwined in a non-separable relationship.

The intrinsic value of the environment has its origin from God—"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1); "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Ps. 24:1). As an act of pure love, God created the world and God "founded the earth to endure" (Ps. 119:90–91). After God's creation of the earth, God gave human beings responsibility over

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creation: "Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth" (Gen. 1:26). Human beings are stewards of creation which has intrinsic value because God is its owner.

It is this author's view, however, that the notion of intrinsic value has to be understood in the context of interdependence and interconnectedness. Everything finds its teleological purpose in the cycle of life. Recognizing intrinsic value does not negate the existential cycle. All that God has created has a purpose in sustaining each species' subsistence—the food cycle is a case in point. Nevertheless, it is all in accord with sustainability. The vice of excessive consumption that results in environmental degradation is contrary to the principles of intrinsic value and balance. It is the symptom of a dysfunctional anthropocentrism.

Conclusion

The impact of human actions on the environment depends on the perspective that defines the relationship between the human community and the environment. A virtuous community focused on the habitual practice of the virtues sustains the environment because when human beings treat each other prudently, justly, steadfastly, and moderately with faith, hope and charity, they act toward non-human species in the same manner.

In a virtuous community, human actions are not motivated by selfish desires but by the concern to care for one another in our common home. We need to have a shift of paradigm—from a dysfunctional anthropocentrism concerned with exploiting the world's resources to a good anthropocentrism that promotes the sustainability of the planet.

The argument in this conversation about environmental sustainability is framed within the concept of the Christian virtues. The habitual practice of the virtues is the moral expression of our love of God and neighbor (Mk. 12:30–31), of living out God's vision of right relationship based on communion with all of God's creation

on this planet. In doing so, we may be able to recover our "attitude of wonder" as Francis explains it.[56] Quoting Benedict XVI, Francis says we have to live a life "of contemplation, of listening to creation" and of being able again to interpret "the rhythm [within it] of the love-story between God and [the human person]."[57]

The Basic Ecclesial Community was used as a case in point to show that a virtuous community is a possible paradigm for environmental sustainability. The members of the Basic Ecclesial Community will become examples of virtuous living for a sustainable planet, our common home. We are reminded of the popular saying—that if we want to change the world, we have to start with ourselves. We should not forget, however, that living a virtuous life for environmental sustainability is a process, one that does not happen overnight. It is a long route because the practice of the virtues has to become habitual; in fact, it is a lifelong undertaking. We may have difficulties, but at least we resolve to go on, virtuously, so that "All May Be One" (Jn. 17:21).

About the Author. **Abundio R. Babor, Jr., M.S.C.** belongs to the congregation of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC). He finished his doctorate in Moral Theology at the Accademia Alfonsiana, Pontifical Lateran University in Rome, Italy. At present, he is teaching Moral Theology at the Loyola School of Theology and Maryhill School of Theology, both in Quezon City, Philippines.

[56] Francis, *Laudato Si'*, no. 11.

[57] Francis, Message for the General Audience (June 5, 2013), available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130605_udienza-generale.html (accessed March 7, 2023).

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