

# Calling Forth the Invisible

**VIRTUE ETHICS IN LAUDATO SI'**

BY NANCY M. ROURKE



On the surface, Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* does not look like a call for an ecological virtue ethics.<sup>1</sup> Large-scale social change seems to be the main point. In two hundred and forty-six paragraphs, the word "virtue" appears only five times. The word "vice" appears once. Yet virtue ethics is the fuel that powers this encyclical. The call for an integral ecology and its repeated reminders that "everything is connected" are rooted in the particular wisdom specific to virtue theory. This chapter will explore the role of virtue ethics in *Laudato si'*.

## VIRTUE ETHICS

Virtue ethics is a moral theory concerned with moral character. Its main focus is not social systems or the morality of actions (although both are nevertheless important). Instead its main concern is us. It examines what we (human beings) are like, the sorts of people we should strive to be, and the ways we can realize this anthropological vision.<sup>2</sup> Virtue theorists imagine the "parts" of a person's moral character, looking for things like virtues and vices. Virtues and vices are habits of being in certain ways. **Because they are**

**habits, virtues and vices are formed by practicing them. Virtues are good traits or tendencies.** Traditionally, virtue ethics calls each virtue a specific "excellence." Virtues are like well-balanced habits. Imagine a kind person as a person who has a habit of being kind and who tends to be good at being kind. This means, of course, a kind person also has other virtues (like patience, frugality, or attentiveness). All these virtues work together to make up a person's moral character.



A moral character has vices. Vices are habits or tendencies that are out of balance, like greed, apathy, or wastefulness. This means a trait that is either too weak or too powerful. For example, one person might have developed the virtue of temperance, which means a tendency to enjoy good things in good amounts and for good reasons.<sup>3</sup> Another person who never practiced being temperate could have a tendency to go overboard with sensory pleasures. That person could have developed a vice like gluttony. A third person might not understand that balanced enjoyment is actually good and, having failed to practice balanced enjoyment, now has a vice like stinginess, or a sour suspicion of all good experiences. **A good moral character is made up of many well-balanced traits, or virtues, all working in a well-balanced way together.**

The explanation of virtue ethics offered above uses hypothetical people to explain what virtues and vices are. This says something else about virtue ethics: it relies on role models, actual and fictional, to help us direct our moral growth in good directions. Think about it: can you

imagine any moral virtue or vice without imagining an example of it, embodied in a person? **Role models help anyone who is interested in becoming a better person to identify what virtues they need to practice and what these embodied habits look like.**

Virtue theory's best insight is that we (humans) can better ourselves. We shape ourselves through practice. Practice means both participating in large-scale actions (like joining a school's efforts to





get solar energy) and doing small actions (like growing a tomato plant for food). According to virtue theories, people become who they want to be by practicing being that way, in big ways and small. Even before governments and organizations offer the programs and structures that help people to live gently on earth, persons and communities can practice participating in the integral ecology vision of Pope Francis's *Laudato si'* (see especially LS 180–81).

*Laudato si'* shows why systemic changes are needed, but it also demonstrates that small actions are important. **Our actions have the power to change us as people. What we do can change our hearts.** Practicing ecologically sustainable habits is the way to sustainable and ecologically aware lifestyles. There are many kinds of virtue theories (Catholic, philosophical, Buddhist) and all of them help to demonstrate that persons' actions all have a way of seeping inwardly into their selves and, in turn, shaping future actions.

## CONCLUSION

*Laudato si'* models virtue ethics. It does not preach it, but it does presume it. The encyclical does not say that virtue ethics will help our ecological problems, and it never lists the virtues one must cultivate. It does assume virtue theory's understanding of morality, and it uses that to help change human attitude and character (LS 107).

**Attitudes and other character traits like virtues are the narrow, deep, and quiet streams that feed human action and lifestyles.** They come from a less carefully monitored source than the intention or the will, which are the traditional foci of much of Catholic ethics. But as *Laudato si'* shows, we ride the surge of these unwatched tributaries and we always carry with us the quality of their water. The things we do when we are not acting deliberately are important because they have consequences<sup>4</sup> and because, through them, we practice being a certain kind of people. This is the very soul of virtue thought. It is also exactly what *Laudato si'* means when it speaks of an integral ecology.



1. Pope Francis, *Laudato si': On Care for Our Common Home*, June 18, 2015, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html).
2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).
3. Diana Fritz Cates, "The Virtue of Temperance," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, edited by Stephen Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 321–39.
4. Habitual and routine actions often have a greater ecological impact than the kinds of actions people carry out after careful deliberation. For example, people may spend several minutes and research carefully while choosing an herbicide for their lawn. But all available herbicides pollute water runoff. This environmental damage is habitually inflicted simply for the purpose of complying with a morally dubious aesthetic—a purpose that does not merit the damage caused. See David Cloutier, *Walking God's Earth: The Environment and Catholic Faith* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014) and Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

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