

Enabling resilience through developing ecological virtues

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Most scientists trace the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic to the illegal wet market trade in an endangered species—pangolins. Humanity's disrupted relationship with the natural world is the source of the virus's origin, but its grim spread across the globe arose from social and political conditions that have arisen, at least in part, from the failure of those in political leadership to exercise appropriate distributive compassion and justice towards vulnerable populations.

Importantly, it is *resilience* on the part of communities facing such challenges that enables survival through developing communities of virtue which are then capable of expressing compassion, right practical wisdom, and justice.

Brazil offers a case study for what I am arguing for in this paper. The Brazilian Prime Minister Jair Bolsonaro, who contracted a mild form of the disease, denied the most impoverished and vulnerable indigenous communities access to basic public health care and preventative measures (Teixeira et al, 2020). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights also report human rights violations which even served to *introduce* Covid into vulnerable populations in Brazil (Indian Resource Center 2020). It is not surprising, therefore, that there has been speculation that the unregulated infection and deaths among indigenous peoples is a form of deliberate genocide to enable unimpeded government sponsored mining projects, devastating the ecosystem and trampling on the environmental rights of those living in the Amazonian region. The original text of the Brazilian Law 021/2020 tried to make basic provision for “universal access to drinking water, the free distribution of hygiene materials, the emergency supply of hospital beds and intensive care

units and the purchase of ventilators and blood oxygenation machines”, but this was vetoed against by President Bolsonaro (Teixeira et al, 2029). It was hardly surprising that the language of genocide has been used, following in the wake of the President's indictment in 2019 before the International Criminal Court for his policies against indigenous peoples.

At the same time, it is in these highly vulnerable indigenous communities that we find sources of resilience through expressions of deep solidarity and compassion, born of practicing ecological virtues like a second nature. It is also within those communities that the relationship with the natural world and the ecosystem is one of respect and mutuality. As the global community considered the 26th Conference of Parties convention on climate change in November 2021 in Glasgow and the postponed 15th Convention on Biodiversity meeting in Kunming in China in late April 2022, dealing with the twin but entangled aspects of climate change and biodiversity loss, what lessons have we learnt both from these resilient communities and past failures of political leaders in the international community to act? More important, how can other communities become resilient in the face of what will inevitably become more and more challenging conditions?

Resilience is a term that has been used in ecology (Gunderson 2000; Carpenter 2011), but more recently it has come to refer to a desirable future, in both ecological and social terms (Parker and Keith 2019). Resilience is defined as “The ability of an ecosystem to absorb changes of state variables, driving variables, and parameters, that is, to persist after disturbance” (Holling, 1973). In order to measure resilience, the intensity of disturbance needs to be

measured along with the threshold switch between states (Standish et al, 2014).

Resilience in ecological terms therefore implies that stability can be reached after perturbations and shocks, though shifts in the philosophy of ecology mean that the whole ecological system is understood as being far more dynamic than previously supposed a century ago.

At a popular level, ecology is presumed to be idealised in a steady state model, rather than subject to adaptability and flux. When resilience is used in social terms, does it, like the term the Anthropocene, also mask ideological, cultural and economic imperialisms? (Malm and Hornborg 2009). A correct interpretation of the religious and social meaning of resilience is important in this context. Is it simply about maintaining the *status quo*, or is it more about rediscovering traditions in a new light? I will argue that it is the latter, that the normative aspects of tradition need to be filtered so that they work *within* rather than against the dynamism of the challenges and changes within which we find ourselves—otherwise known as an ecological and social crisis.

One of the terms which has had much purchase in eco-theology, influenced by religious leaders of both Catholic and Orthodox traditions, is that of *ecological conversion*. This is premised on the idea that secular concepts are insufficient. As Pope Francis claims in *Fratelli Tutti*, “Anyone who thinks that the only lesson to be learned was the need to improve what we were already doing, or to refine existing systems and regulations, is denying reality” (Pope Francis 2020: §7). However, even within Catholic social thought the meaning of a critical concept like ecological conversion is beginning to change.

I will first show how the Magisterium has shifted in its understanding of ecological conversion. I will then suggest that a rallying call for such conversion is an important starting point, but does not yet spell out more practically how the religious community, rather than just individuals, needs to change in order to become more resilient. Ecological conversion needs to include allowing for and giving respect to those exemplar communities that have learnt how to be resilient.

In Catholic social thought the term ecological conversion began being used at the turn of the twenty first century. In a pastoral letter written in 2003 addressed to the Bishops and leaders of the Church, *Pastores Gregis*, Pope John Paul II claims that:

“There is a need for *ecological conversion*, to which Bishops themselves can contribute by their teaching about the correct relationship of human beings with nature. Seen in the light of the doctrine of God the Father, the maker of heaven and earth, this relationship is one of ‘stewardship’: human beings are set at the centre of creation as stewards of the Creator” (Pope John Paul II 2003: § 70).

Note, in this example, how he expresses a clear need for a well-functioning anthropology: a correct relationship between human beings and nature. Yet this relationship is one that is premised on an understanding of God as Creator. For Pope John Paul II ecological conversion means in practice *proper stewardship* of creation, inspired directly by Genesis 1.28 and within a presupposition of human beings at the centre of creation.

Pope John Paul II also collaborated with Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and their joint letter on environmental responsibility published in June 2002 was one of the most significant statements on ecological conversion. What they both pressed for was the need for a cultural *metanoia*, an inner change of heart. Further, it was a change of heart both inspired by and attentive to conversion to Christ:

“A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an *inner change of heart*, which can lead to a change in lifestyle and of unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act.” (Pope John Paul II and Bartholomew I 2002).

Pope Francis, on the other hand, avoids the idea that human beings are at the centre of our world, conscious of the dangers of an inappropriate anthropocentrism. So, “When human beings place themselves at the centre, they give absolute priority to immediate convenience and all else becomes relative” (Pope Francis 2015: § 122) The point is that he starts to *qualify* more traditional Catholic anthropocentrism.

So far practical aspects of how to sustain community resilience in a religious setting is not spelt out, as that requires practical theological approaches that are grounded in specific contexts. Pope Francis provides hints at such changes by encouraging an approach that relies on the concept of integral ecology rather than the technological paradigm, and encourages *communal* and *political* ecological conversion at the structural level as well as individ-



ual conversion, but he leaves details to be worked out at the local level. I suggest, however, that a little more could be said about the need to develop ecological virtues that he hints at in his 2015 encyclical.

The first, most basic disposition that needs to be developed to enable resilience in the wake of ecological and other socio-political challenges and one that ecologists and indigenous communities themselves practice through their work is that of *paying attention* (Deane-Drummond 2021). It is closely related to that of wonder and delight, but not equivalent to it.

Wonder and delight is *also* a pre-requisite for the development of ecological virtues.¹ I am defining the human *capacity* for wonder as an ability to have a heightened psychological and emotional state engendered by particular experiences. Wonder may, therefore, include undertones of fear or anxiety as well as joy, but to be relevant for ecological virtues it is that form of wonder mixed with delight that is the most relevant.²

It is important to note that emotions such as wonder are not simply confined to individuals, but have the capability to spread across communities and thus influence wider cultural trends at a collective and political level. While it is outside the scope of this paper to discuss embodied mind theories, the most important point is that newer psychological theories are not individualistic but *collective* in their interpretation of how the mind works. Inter-bodily and intra-bodily resonance theory, for example, according to Thomas Fuchs, who argues in favour of an embodied mind, allow feelings across communities to be expressed as bodily reactions, such as blushing as part of a shame response or contagious laughter. Other people are affected as part of a continuous interactive process (Froese and Fuchs 2012: 212).

Simone Weil's literary works elaborate on what paying attention means at an inner level of consciousness. For Simone Weil paying attention includes "suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated" (Weil 2009: 62). Her primary goal is to stress *receptivity* in the one who is seeking—a point that also coheres with Pope

Francis' stress on the idea of *openness to others*. "Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth..." (Weil 2009: 62). Attention is to be directed both to *truth* and to *suffering*. Paying attention begins to school us in love, and this love is reached through a process of death and dying to self. For her, the human soul had to: "pass through its own annihilation to the place where alone it can get the sort of attention which can attend to truth and to affliction...The name of this intense, pure, disinterested, gratuitous, generous attention is love" (Weil 2005: 92).

Anguish and the importance of the virtue of justice

Weil's analysis, therefore, includes a readiness to acknowledge the difficulties of our current socio-ecological context, including massive loss in biodiversity, combined with increasing poverty, combined with unjust forms of political leadership. For her, the "radiance of beauty illumines affliction with the light of the spirit of justice and love" (Weil 2005: 92).

The thought of true beauty being somehow present even in the suffering and in spite of evil that has surfaced is also a strong theme in the theological aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar (Balthasar 1982). Further, a sense of anguish, as well as wonder, can spread through communities in a way that leads to widespread eco-anxiety, supported by social media and other platforms. There is a fine line between anxiety that can lead to a sense of urgency and action, and the kind of anxiety that leads to despair and despondency. Von Balthasar's approach is relevant to the collective and social traumas that are currently dominating the social and political landscape; for it encourages, at least among Christian believers, a search for collective justice, accompaniment of the vulnerable in their pain, and working towards challenging those societal structures that are partly responsible for setting in motion the suffering that is endured.

Balthasar's approach is more radical than Weil's in that he suggests that the image of suffering Christ not only confronts the evil of crucifixion but also overturns the mundane meaning of beauty. He also envisages beauty classically as one of the transcendentals, along with goodness and truth. For Balthasar, an encounter with the true beauty of Christ crucified does not just transform suffering,

1 Aspects of this and the following section are drawn from Deane-Drummond 2021.

2 It is worth noting in passing that the natural world was, in the past, experienced as threatening rather than awesome in terms of its relationship with wonder (Glacken 1976).



but, even more importantly, challenges a *transformation of human consciousness as to what beauty is really like*.

Can we glimpse hints at Christ's beauty rising to the surface in the loving and compassionate actions that we witness by both individuals and communities even in the midst of the appalling suffering arising in the devastation brought about by global pandemic, climate change, and mass extinctions, that scientists are now calling the sixth great extinction event? There is a paradox here that is worth addressing. We should have no hesitation about collectively working at the socio-political and local levels to control diseases in their destructive course and challenging ecological devastation that arises out of human negligence, overconsumption or other indirect impact through climate change and habitat loss. We might experience wonder at humanity's ability to inflict cruelty, and be responsible for destroying other species irreversibly, but this is not a form of wonder that is appropriately disciplined by love or justice.

Both *ecological justice* and *environmental justice* are relevant in terms of love in action, where the former refers to what is due to all creatures. Political leaders who fail to exercise justice fail in their duty to those who are in their power. Environmental justice is basic rights for all people and cultures in order to live a flourishing and healthy human life, such as access to clean air and water.

1. The connection between paying attention and the classic virtue of *studiositas*.

So, if paying attention is critical for compassion, which then informs the practice of justice as virtue, is there a way in which our desires can be directed towards paying greater attention in the right kind of way towards the common good? In Aquinas we find the classic virtue of *studiositas* fulfils this role as a *moral* and not just an *intellectual* virtue. The orientation of the virtues towards the common good is important, since it impinges not just on what is good for the individual but the good for the community as a whole, and therefore has important social and political implications.

In the case study from Brazil given earlier, Bol-sorano failed to consider the common good, failed to exercise compassion and justice, and paid attention simply to his own specific desires rather than the good of the community. *Studiositas*, by being a moral virtue, necessarily moves the individual away

from desires that are self-centred towards actions and attitudes that are for the sake of others. The virtues, when considered in this way, therefore have social and political implications insofar as they are capable of critiquing the political *status quo* and so inspiring a different way of setting priorities and policies.

There is a *positive*, but restrained, drive in *studiositas*, and not simply open receptivity. *Studiositas* is antagonistic to a sensibility that avoids the effort in seeking knowledge and so expresses "a certain keenness of interest in seeking knowledge of things; and from this it takes its name" (Aquinas 2a2ae: Qu. 167.2). The overall drive in *studiositas* is towards *right types of knowing*. This right kind of knowing can be discerned not just within the conscience of individuals, but at a community level as well, when collective decisions are made.

Is there a *studiositas* proper to each of the virtues, and *ecological virtues* in particular? Is it the means through which human communities can therefore become resilient in the appropriate way to both the political and ecological challenges that they face? The answer to this seems to me to be yes. *Studiositas'* integral association with *temperance*, for example, is important for any ecological ethic. *Ecological temperance* is about restraining yet directing desires and motivations in a way that aligns with the needs of humanity and all creatures in our common home. At the same time, the positive direction in *studiositas* associated with *charity* expressed as an ecological virtue goes further than a simple loving receptivity. *Studiositas* can also deepen our understanding of what ecological justice requires. *Ecological fortitude* is about not giving up when there seems to be a reversal in hoped-for positive ecological changes.

2. *Studiositas* and *prudence*, practical wisdom.

What might *studiositas* proper to practical wisdom as an ecological virtue look like in this context? Practical wisdom is particularly important when decision making is complex, as in difficult decisions that need to be made at all levels (political, familial and individual) in a complex scenario which raises the demands of those living in extreme poverty and runaway ecological devastation that we are presently experiencing. Practical wisdom, or *prudence*, is an *intellectual* virtue, and one of the four cardinal virtues alongside justice, temperance, and fortitude, all of which can be expressed in ways that are perti-



nent for ecological flourishing. The argument here is to some extent circular: prudence sets the mean of *studiositas* as a moral virtue, but at the same time, there is also a *studiositas* proper to prudential reasoning in relation to its role in the moral life, and, in the case under consideration, eco-social responsibility. Nonetheless, *studiositas* can, like any virtue, gradually slip into a vice and when it does so it takes on a different name, *curiositas*. Judging what is the virtuous mean in *studiositas* and when it has veered away from that mean is a task of prudence. Prudence is, further, not just an individual virtue, but as Aquinas recognised, works at the familial, community, and political levels as well. Just as prudence in an individual can enable morally good acts, so prudence at a political level is orientated towards distributive justice.

3. The relationship between *studiositas*, compassion and hope.

My argument so far has stressed the ways in which paying attention to the natural world, refined through the virtue of *studiositas*, and indeed paying attention to each other, is bound up with our ability to show compassion and kindness, along with rightly ordered practical wisdom exercised within community contexts. So, *both heart and mind* need to be engaged in a common eco-social task. Further, in the global context of climate change and biodiversity loss, developing this way of responding and thinking has never been more critical. The virtue of hope is a spur to action by making an experience more intense. When the object of our hope is good, difficult—but possible, Aquinas argues, “the thought of its being difficult arouses our attention; while the thought that it is possible is no drag on our effort” (Aquinas 1a2ae Qu. 40.8). Difficulties, therefore, even those associated with ecological crises, could be viewed as challenges which then invite even greater attention through the possibility of change (Aquinas: 1a2ae Qu. 33.3).

Pope Francis comments in *Fratelli Tutti* that “it is truly noble to place our hope in the hidden power of the seeds of goodness we sow, and thus to initiate processes whose fruits will be reaped by others. Good politics combines love with hope and with confidence in the reserves of goodness present in human hearts” (Pope Francis 2020: § 196).

4. Discovering that this enlarged expression of virtue through connectedness and solidarity with all beings is a way of gaining true resilience through healing our fundamental brokenness, the symptom of which is the various ecological and health crises.

Finding and developing a closer reconnection with the land and its creatures, even in recognising their suffering and pain also, in a profound way, promotes our own inner healing. That healing is best understood not as an individual isolated, beleaguered self, but happens within communities and cultures that understand the importance of community relationships. As Western societies have become more individualistic and isolated from one another, the ability to make close relationships and connections has become diminished. Engaging in ecological restoration and other collective projects has positive psychological impacts on individuals within communities. One reason for this may be that it was within these eco-social relationships that humanity evolved. The moral marker in the very deepest time band in early human communities was our ability to show deep compassion to each other who were sick or suffering.

A study of early human evolution shows, in an astonishing way, the self-sacrifice of others towards those who were sick and disabled in a way that even exceeded that in later centuries. (Spikins 2015; Deane-Drummond 2019: 83–90). It was in this crucible of vulnerability, suffering, and climate change that human communities evolved and learned to flourish. At the same time these early human communities were sensitive too and responsive to the world around them, since it was necessary as a matter of survival. While our relationship with predatory animals was always ambiguous, for centuries human communities have found not just nourishment but medicinal products within their ecological niche. In the current century, our problems are psychological as much as physical and our need for healing relates to rising levels of anxiety and fear. Climate anxiety is a good example of this, but we can expect more to come.

It is worth pausing here to ask why we have been slow to learn these lessons, even through centuries of change. Industrial agriculture dominating the Western world destroys the living fabric of the soil, leading eventually to dust bowls, less nutritious crops and greater and greater reliance on artificial fertilizers. It also prevents the living creatures in the

soil from acting as a carbon sink. Scientific consensus in the Paris agreement of 2015 was that reforming agriculture towards 'Restoration' methods will provide the essential means to reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, thus contributing in a significant way to the control of exponential climate change. It also makes economic sense, as farmers are less reliant on government subsidies. This is practical wisdom, but why have we been slow to recognise this? One of the reasons may be the tension between felt individual desires and the failure to understand that commitment to the common good at the social, community, and political levels secures greater resilience within those communities and therefore a different kind and more enduring form of human flourishing.

The practical shape of that ecological responsibility appropriate for educational contexts and not just within ecclesial circles could take some cues from the agrarian context of the biblical world. Such an agrarian context affirms kinship and solidarity between different life forms, without maintaining a total loss of boundary conditions between different species. Such an agrarian approach of belonging to a specific place finds modern expression in the work of authors such as Wendell Berry. Berry made it his life's ambition to find a way of deeply belonging to a place (Berry 2004, 150). It is time to acknowledge that indigenous communities have been exemplars of such sustainable practices for centuries.

Concluding Remarks

I have argued so far that, given the combined ecological and human crises that we find ourselves in, the human experience of wonder in contemplating the natural world is an important first step in energizing a collective sense of responsibility for it. Further, fostering socially and ecologically relevant virtues both build up individual and community resilience and encourage protest against the failure of political leaders to exercise their responsibilities to others in solidarity with indigenous communities who have learnt the art of resilience and ecological virtues. Expression of that collective responsibility arising from an individual's sense of wonder can take the form of not just individual projects, but collective projects such as community gardens, collective works of ecological restoration, conservation or political advocacy for care for our common home. I have also suggested that wonder as an emotion is

not simply confined to an individual's brain, but can spread as an emotion across communities through a process of resonance. That resonance can be fostered within community projects, thus potentiating the psychological impact. Wonder may also be positive in promoting freedom from egoistic attachment to purely rationalistic goals. Wonder towards the natural world on its own is, however, morally ambiguous.

Paying attention, understood according to Simone Weil and moderated through the input of Aquinas on the virtue of *studiositas*, demands that our looking is no longer possessive, and such an encounter is also crucially informed by love and justice. There is also a *studiositas* proper to each of the virtues, and, in the specific context of ecological responsibility, temperance, compassion, justice, and practical wisdom come to the fore. If other creatures are included in a more explicit way, this virtue can, at least, begin to show where our attention needs to be placed. Such virtues can be worked out and expressed in collective and political decision making and not just individual acts of discernment.

We might ask ourselves: does focusing attention on the natural world in explicitly *religious* terms make any difference? For Simone Weil paying absolute attention is like a letting go of all pride and is the same kind of activity as prayer. What does Weil have to say to the political leaders who make and pass laws? For her "Extreme attention is what constitutes the creative faculty in man and the only extreme attention is religious" (Weil 2002: 117). In this way, crucially, Weil can claim that "The attention turned with love towards God (or in a lesser degree, towards anything that is truly beautiful) makes certain things impossible for us" (Weil 2002, 2019). Attention in Weil's thought needs therefore to be interpreted as a particular kind of looking and perceiving that then leads to an openness to an experience of deep wonder and awe, without becoming too attached to the creatures that are then contemplated. Aquinas also, interestingly, develops a strong link between attention and prayer, so "attention is absolutely necessary for prayer" (Aquinas 2a2ae: Qu. 83.13).

Reawakening a religious sense of paying attention in a non-possessive way, particularly in ecclesial settings, not only challenges the kind of egocentrism that fosters ecological irresponsibility. It also encourages positive ecological responsibility when that attention is directed towards love of the natural world that is freed from the bondage of possessive



desires. This may be one reason why Rachel Carson was intuitively accurate when she suggested we needed to recover something of the innocence of childhood in order to experience wonder that will lead to appropriate action.

In this sense it is the *transformation of our desires* in heightened experience of explicitly religious wonder *disciplined by studiositas proper to love, practical wisdom, and justice* that is particularly important. But such close encounter with creation shows up a darkness of incomprehension in the face of beauty alongside unspeakable suffering and pain. COVID-19 has focused our attention to suffering humanity. In this way, humanity is forced to acknowledge its own ignorance, and therefore is more likely to adopt a modest view of how to approach ecological responsibility. It therefore encourages what might be termed biblical wisdom, understood as one that is schooled through the experience of patient connectivity with the land and other creatures. Such practices are embedded in the wisdom of indigenous communities. Hence, it is in dialogue and solidarity that we learn from others in sincere respect, rather than treating people or other creatures unlike ourselves as mere objects of our charity or even campaigns for justice. Social and political transformation begins with cultural and community transformation that is also dependent on individual conversion. Resilience and protest against unjust political structures requires, therefore a development of those ecologically relevant virtues which shift the concern of agents to care for others, including the natural world.

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