Bioethics in Laudato si’

The Ecological Law as a Moral Principle

Rev. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, OP

Abstract. In his encyclical on the environment, Laudato si’, Pope Francis proposes that the natural moral law can be reimagined as an ecological moral law that challenges us to evaluate the morality of our actions not only within our personal and nonpersonal relationships in society but also within the greater reality that is creation. In this essay, the author offers several reflections on the ramifications of this innovative proposal on a contemporary Catholic bioethics that seeks to be faithful to the classical moral tradition. National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly 15.4 (Winter 2015): 657–663.

It is not surprising that Pope Francis’s recent encyclical Laudato si’, published on May 24, 2015, has been described in the popular press as an encyclical on the environment. The opening paragraphs of the document highlight the plight of “our Sister, Mother Earth . . . burdened and laid waste, [who] is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor.” However, Laudato si’ is also an encyclical with bioethical import. I would like to suggest that in his letter that is addressed to “every person living on this planet,” Francis proposes that the natural moral law can be reimagined as an ecological moral law that challenges us to evaluate the morality of our actions not only within our personal and nonpersonal relationships in society, but also within the greater reality that is creation. In this essay, I offer several reflections on the ramifications of this innovative proposal on a contemporary Catholic bioethics that seeks to be faithful to the classical moral tradition.

Rev. Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, OP, PhD, STD, is an associate professor of biology and of theology at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island.

1 Francis, Laudato si’, On Care for Our Common Home (May 24, 2015), nn. 1, 2. Hereafter cited within the text.
The Ecological Moral Law

For St. Thomas Aquinas, a law is a rule and measure of acts, whereby the human agent is induced to act or is restrained from acting. Distinguishing the different kinds of law, he famously proposed that the natural law is how the human agent participates in the eternal law, which is the plan of divine providence that orders and governs creation. It tells him that good must be done and evil must be avoided. It is revealed in those natural inclinations that move us to, among other things, our self-preservation, true and certain knowledge of the world, life in society, and God. These are goods that are proportioned to and perfective of our nature. However, the natural law is a dictate of reason and not a mere physical inclination. Thus, the precepts of the natural law prescribe how the human agent should pursue his natural inclinations precisely as a rational creature with intellect and will.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the natural law that orders human behavior in society should be distinguishable from biological instincts, which in the brute animals would govern a lion’s behavior in a pride or a buffalo’s actions in a herd. Notably, the tenets of the natural law are most clearly articulated in the Old Law, which in Aquinas’s view “manifested the precepts of the natural law.” Prominent among these ordinances of the Old Law are the commandments to love God and our neighbor. In the end, for Aquinas and the perennial philosophical tradition, the natural law reveals those goods that are truly perfective of our nature. Thus, it is a normative guide that should move us to act in certain ways and to refrain from acting in other ways.

In *Laudato si’*, Francis affirms the importance of the natural law in moral reasoning by confirming his predecessor’s magisterium: “Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of an ‘ecology of man,’ based on the fact that ‘man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will.’” Note the classical reference to the natural law as a moral law that is inscribed in our nature. Significantly, however, elsewhere in the encyclical, the Francis extends that law beyond our relationships with God and neighbor. He says it must include a moral consideration of our relationships with the other creatures that God has created:

---

3 Ibid., I-II.91.2.
4 Ibid., I-II.94.2.
5 Ibid., I-II.98.5. All English translations from the Latin are my own. For a discussion of how the Old Law reveals the natural law according to the mind of Aquinas, see the two essays by Randall Smith: “What the Old Law Reveals about the Natural Law According to Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 75.1 (January 2011): 95–139; and “Thomas Aquinas on the Ten Commandments and the Natural Law,” in *The Decalogue and Its Cultural Influence*, ed. Dominik Markl (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 148–168.
6 *Summa theologiae* I-II.100.11.
7 *Laudato si*’, n. 155, citing Benedict XVI, Address to the German Bundestag (September 22, 2011).
This responsibility for God’s earth means that human beings, endowed with intelligence, must respect the laws of nature and the delicate equilibria existing between the creatures of this world, for “he commanded and they were created; and he established them for ever and ever; he fixed their bounds and he set a law which cannot pass away” (Ps 148:5b-6). The laws found in the Bible dwell on relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings. “You shall not see your brother’s donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and withhold your help. . . . If you chance to come upon a bird’s nest in any tree or on the ground, with young ones or eggs and the mother sitting upon the young or upon the eggs; you shall not take the mother with the young” (Dt. 22:4, 6). Along these same lines, rest on the seventh day is meant not only for human beings, but also so “that your ox and your donkey may have rest” (Ex. 23:12). Clearly, the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures. (n. 68)

The natural law is not only inscribed in nature but is also manifest in the “equilibria existing between the creatures of this world” and the “relationships, not only among individuals but also with other living beings,” which must be respected by all moral agents. Ecology is the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. By asking us to consider the importance of the web of all the relationships in which the human agent finds himself embedded as a part of creation, the Pope reimagines the natural law as an ecological moral law.

For Francis, the notion of an ecological moral law emerges from a profound vision of God’s creative handiwork that acknowledges that the human being is just one part—though a part with unique worth and unparalleled dignity in material creation—of the grand tapestry of life that is woven together by the manifold relationships among all the living corporeal beings in the universe. Citing Aquinas, the Pope notes that the multiplicity and diversity that is seen in creation “‘come from the intention of the first agent,’ who willed that ‘what was wanting to one in the representation of divine goodness might be supplied by another,’ inasmuch as God’s goodness ‘could not be represented fittingly by any one creature’” (n. 86, quoting the Summa theologiae I.47.1). Strikingly, for the Pope, within this panoramic vision of God’s creation, human agents are called not only to perfect themselves and each other, as the classical account of natural law proposes, but also to bring every other creature under heaven to its perfection in God: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ. . . . The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all creatures are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival, which is God, in that transcendent fullness where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the

8 Ibid., n. 90: “This is not to put all living beings on the same level nor to deprive human beings of their unique worth and the tremendous responsibility it entails. Nor does it imply a divinization of the earth which would prevent us from working on it and protecting it in its fragility. Such notions would end up creating new imbalances which would deflect us from the reality which challenges us.”
fullness of Christ, are called to lead all creatures back to their Creator” (n. 83). For the Holy Father, it is clear that human agents have to play an active role in realizing the hopes of a creation that “would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21, NABRE).

Finally, the ecological perspective of the natural law taught in Laudato si’ also challenges us to especially consider the effect of our actions on the poor, who are an integral but neglected part of an authentic human ecology. This is a novel justification for the preferential option of the poor and the marginalized, which has been a foundational principle for the social teaching of the Catholic Church. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, “Those who are oppressed by poverty are the object of a preferential love on the part of the Church which, since her origin and in spite of the failings of many of her members, has not ceased to work for their relief, defense, and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere.”9 Laudato si’ now proposes that the Church has also sought to alleviate the misery of the poor because they are an integral part of God’s creation that needs to be brought to its perfection.

Notably, in his encyclical, the Pope is critical of those who would promote the good of the environment while ignoring the misery of the poor:

At times we see an obsession with denying any pre-eminence to the human person; more zeal is shown in protecting other species than in defending the dignity which all human beings share in equal measure. Certainly, we should be concerned lest other living beings be treated irresponsibly. But we should be particularly indignant at the enormous inequalities in our midst, whereby we continue to tolerate some considering themselves more worthy than others. We fail to see that some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions, vainly showing off their supposed superiority and leaving behind them so much waste which, if it were the case everywhere, would destroy the planet. (n. 90)

Conversely, he is also critical of those who think that their attitude toward creation does not influence how they relate to their neighbor: “It follows that our indifference or cruelty towards fellow creatures of this world sooner or later affects the treatment we mete out to other human beings. We have only one heart, and the same wretchedness which leads us to mistreat an animal will not be long in showing itself in our relationships with other people. Every act of cruelty towards any creature is ‘contrary to human dignity’” (n. 92). Here, Francis is echoing his predecessor Benedict XVI, who also taught, “The way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa.”10 An ecological moral law that seeks to promote an authentic human ecology needs to challenge all moral agents to consider the perfection of every creature on this planet, personal and nonpersonal, including and especially the poor and the poorest of the poor.

---

9 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2448, original emphasis.
10 Benedict XVI, Caritas in veritate (June 29, 2009), n. 51, original emphasis.
The Ecological Context of Bioethics

Catholic bioethics is the branch of moral theology that applies the principles of Christian morality to the profound question of how we are to live a full, meaningful, and holy life in light of the social and technological changes propelled by advances in the life sciences and modern medicine. In several places in Laudato si’, Francis takes his reimagined account of the natural law as an ecological moral law and uses it to address several contemporary bioethical questions. Take abortion. As Pope St. John Paul II, citing the Second Vatican Council, definitively taught in his encyclical Evangelium vitae, procured abortion is an unspeakable crime because we are dealing here with the murder of an innocent human being at the very beginning of his life.11

But why do women have abortions, and why do men pressure them into having abortions? For Francis, seen within a wider ecological context, abortion stems from a mindset, tragically common in our “throwaway culture,” that is allergic to accepting anything in life that is troublesome and inconvenient, whether that thing is a human embryo or an impoverished Sister, Mother Earth (n. 120). Thus, in the Holy Father’s view, one can only be truly pro-life if one is also truly pro-environment, and vice-versa. Moreover, one can only be for life and for the environment, if one is also truly for the poor:

When we fail to acknowledge as part of reality the worth of a poor person, a human embryo, a person with disabilities—to offer just a few examples—it becomes difficult to hear the cry of nature itself; everything is connected. Once the human being declares independence from reality and behaves with absolute dominion, the very foundations of our life begin to crumble, for “instead of carrying out his role as a cooperator with God in the work of creation, man sets himself up in place of God and thus ends up provoking a rebellion on the part of nature.” (n. 117, quoting John Paul II, Centesimus annus)

The line in this text that stands out is ecological in nature: Everything is connected! Given this, as the Pope points out, “it is troubling that, when some ecological movements defend the integrity of the environment, rightly demanding that certain limits be imposed on scientific research, they sometimes fail to apply those same principles to human life” (n. 136). Instead, these pro-environmental groups tend “to justify transgressing all boundaries when experimentation is carried out on living human embryos” (n. 136). Abortion is intrinsically evil not only because it kills the fetal child and disorders his mother, but also because it enables a consumerist and throwaway culture that discriminates against the poor.

Take another bioethical issue addressed in Laudato si’, genetically modified organisms (GMOs). According to the Pope, the moral judgments regarding the goodness or evilness of GMOs are difficult to make because of the great diversity of GMOs (n. 133). However, to evaluate their worth, the Holy Father urges us to consider not only the genetic modification of living things in itself, but also the effect of these GMOs on the livelihood of poor and on the integrity of the local ecosystem. Once again, he places much emphasis on the moral influence of an action on

11 John Paul II, Evangelium vitae (March 25, 1995), n. 58.
The ecological relationships of that human agent and his community. With regards to GMOs, Laudato si’ acknowledges that their use, in certain places, “has brought about economic growth which has helped to resolve problems,” but the encyclical also raises the concern that their use drives out local farmers, “the most vulnerable of [whom] become temporary labourers, [who] end up moving to poverty-stricken urban areas” (n. 134). Moreover, the expansion of these GMO crops also “has the effect of destroying the complex network of ecosystems, diminishing the diversity of production and affecting regional economies, now and in the future” (n. 134).

Finally, consider the regulation of birth. Francis takes governments and international agencies to task for policies that promote population control and “reproductive health” as a solution to poverty (n. 50). Instead, the problem of poverty is rooted in the “extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some … where the minority believes that it has the right to consume in a way that can never be universalized, since the planet could not even contain the waste products of such consumption” (n. 50). Bioethicists who defend the Church’s teachings on the proper regulation of birth according to right reason should be challenged to broaden their discussion of how the use of contraceptives distorts the meaning of the marital act to include a consideration of its wider ramifications on the environment and on the poor. As Francis rightly notes, contraception facilitates a throwaway culture that is often associated with a willful negligence of environmental concerns. More directly, however, in the spirit of Laudato si’, I point out that the active ingredient in most contraceptive pills, ethinyl estradiol, is a known pollutant that causes widespread damage in the aquatic environment by disrupting endocrine systems in wildlife. The ubiquitous use of contraceptives has damaged not only the human agent’s ecological balance but also the planet’s ecological wellbeing as well.

Three Considerations

I have proposed that the Pope’s reimagining in Laudato si’ of the natural law as an ecological moral law is a development in the magisterial tradition that should challenge Catholic bioethicists to consider the interdependence of realities not usually juxtaposed in their discussions. This is not to deny that there are Catholic bioethicists who have considered the effect of medicine and biotechnology on the poor and the environment. However, they have not done so from the classical perspective of the natural law tradition.

Three considerations bring this magisterial development into conversation with the classical moral tradition. First, in the classical tradition, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which encompasses all the social goods needed for the perfection of the human agent, who by nature is a social animal. In light of the proposals of Laudato si’, should we not consider the existence of a parallel ecological good, which encompasses all the goods needed for the perfection not

13 Catechism, nn. 1905, 1212.
only of the human agent considered as an integral part of that creation, but also the other living beings on the planet, which in the thought of Francis, have their ultimate destiny in the fullness of God? Practical reasoning would have to simultaneously consider the individual, the common, and the ecological good as it examines the proper ordering of human action according to right reason.\textsuperscript{14}

Next, in the classical tradition, Aquinas distinguishes the virtue of justice into two species, distributive justice and commutative justice, where the former is concerned with the mutual dealings between two persons, while the latter is concerned with the dealings between the community and a particular person.\textsuperscript{15} In light of the proposals of \textit{Laudato si’}, should we not consider the existence of a third species of justice, which can be called \textit{ecological justice}, which is concerned with the dealings between both the individual and his community, and creation? The virtuous agent and community would have to ensure that they are ecologically just in the same way that they work to be just in all their dealings with the other individuals in the commonweal.

Finally, in the classical tradition, the virtuous agent is counseled to act in accordance with an order of charity (\textit{ordo caritatis}) that should govern all his actions.\textsuperscript{16} According to this ordering, one has to love God, one’s spiritual self, one’s neighbor, and then one’s body, in that order. In light of the proposals of \textit{Laudato si’}, should we not consider the existence of an additional constituent in this \textit{ordo caritatis}, which would be a love of creation, not as an independent reality, but as the artwork of a beloved Artist? If so, where should it be placed in the classical order of charity?

My hope is that these three preliminary considerations will stimulate discussion and further investigation into the ramifications of Francis’s innovative proposal on a contemporary Catholic bioethics that seeks to be faithful to the classical natural law tradition.

\textsuperscript{14} I am aware that the environment is often included in the common good (See \textit{Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church}, n. 166). By distinguishing the ecological good from the common good, I want to emphasize that the environment and the non-personal organisms that comprise it have a good in themselves apart from their ordering to the human good. As Pope Francis explains it in \textit{Laudato si’}: “The ultimate destiny of the universe is in the fullness of God, which has already been attained by the risen Christ. . . . The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not found in us” (n. 83).

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Summa theologiae} II-II.61.1.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., II-II.26.1–13.