NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Nine ecological virtues (continued)

Rich Heffern | Feb. 8, 2011 Eco Catholic

Biodiversity: No one has the whole answer ? not even the entire human race. We need each other, with our diverse and even conflicting, points of view. And we need the other life on the planet ? her plants, animals, seas and mountains. Rachel Carson, who began the environmental movement 60 years ago by penning a protest against widespread, indiscriminate use of DDT, called her book Silent Spring. That two-word title offered a vision of the world with greatly diminished biodiversity ? and it scared the daylights out of us.

Since the universe and the Earth itself are living webs of relationship, it follows that a respect for diversity and an attentive listening to others? point of view is the only way we will find our way out of the mess we?re in, as our human-centered worldview gives way to one that recognizes we are a strand in a complex living weave.

Sufficiency. Franciscan preacher Fr. Richard Rohr once said: ?Christianity is the only religion that dares to call God a lamb.? What is the nature of a lamb, if not simple, vulnerable and dependent upon others. The wisdom Rohr points to lies in recognizing the importance of living so that we are, in fact, dependent upon others. The values of the Gospel often turn things upside down and inside out. Our culture directs us to engineer our total security, to surround ourselves with things and wealth, so that we are in no way dependent on anyone else. Jesus said that if we protect ourselves from insecurity, from vulnerability, we in turn cut ourselves off from God. To be human is to be insecure, and God chose to be a lamb in our midst. ?Less is really more,? Rohr concludes.

Dependency naturally leads to a sense of sufficiency, for accumulating or hoarding things doesn?t make sense when you know you absolutely need other people for your life to continue and flourish. The Gospel call to dependency on others summons us also to be satisfied less with material wealth and more with human community, with developing creativity, with simple craft and art and making do, with conversation, lovemaking and play together, knowing what is enough, knowing that we cannot live without others or thrive apart from the community of life on Earth.

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Knowing how much is enough is a way to compassionate living. When we are not busy acquiring and accumulating, then we have time for nourishing ourselves and others. It is a sure-fire way to heal a life and to heal a world.

Humility. Richard Rohr again: ?I don?t believe Jesus gave us a plan of what the perfect society is supposed to look like. It?s not evident from the New Testament anyway. Instead, Jesus gave us a process, a way of being, a way to look behind things and to press forward to the truth. It is humility.?

How can we begin to solve the immense problems we face without a method to discern the truth? A reliable way may be the well-worn path of humility. In the crucible of humility, all the other ecological virtues come together and brew a sturdy, reliable strategy for living and discerning the right decisions for a future for our children. Humility means attentive listening, realizing that no one of us has all the answers. ?It?s become very obvious to me,? said the artist Edgar Degas, ?that I know nothing ? and that that?s the only way to get ahead.?

Mary?s *Magnificat* calls for a sacred community, based on humility, that provides good news for the poor, while scattering the proud with all their plans. The very word ?humility? is related to humus, the things of the Earth. It is a kind of practiced wisdom that comes from knowing where we fit into creation. Poet and farmer Wendell Berry wrote about this sense of humility that involves us in our place in the human, Earth and sacred community.

?We must learn to acknowledge that the creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation, and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.?

Virtues contribute to our survival, enable us to live rightly as citizens on the planet, to take risks and be creative, to develop the dignity and depth of our being. Each of these ecological virtues calls us to do something, and that call is the difference between a spirituality that is practiced and lived out and one that is theoretical and ?in the head.?

Their true goal is the creation of a living, loving community in which we can heal ourselves, heal others, and heal the Earth?s living systems. Earth-based spirituality calls us to live with integrity, to act out of what we believe, to take responsibility for our lives and for our impact on the place where we live, to consider future generations to come.

Your lungs are a sacred well, just as your heart is a holy burning coal, part of the delicate beauty and subtle balance that is Earth?s life. A mystery weaves the universe. Its breath sustains us. We are not the Earth, but we take our being from her. In her life, we have life. As she is, so are we. Honor and listen, for today she calls out for healing.

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