

TEN RULES FOR ECOLOGICAL DISCERNMENT

Walter Ceysens

IT HAPPENS TO US all too often: you know what the right thing to do is, but you still do not act on it, as if there is a short circuit between head and hands. This is certainly true for ecological transition, the social and economic shift towards sustainability that is needed in our lives and in our communities. How much inner resistance there is to overcome before we get rid of that handy plastic bag, before we stop packing our lunch in aluminium foil, or are finally going to opt for public transport? Everything becomes even more difficult when we are aware of the gravity and complexity of our ecological problems on a planetary scale. We wonder, then, if it even makes sense to do anything at all.

To achieve sustainable change, we need to be engaged wholeheartedly, and that is often where the shoe pinches. We do not have an easy grip on our feelings, thoughts and motivations. Criticisms of entrenched habits, behavioural patterns and traditions are pertinent here. Many people would prefer not to believe in global warming rather than make the necessary environmentally friendly choices. This is very irrational, of course, but understandable: we would rather close our eyes than face immense and far-reaching ecological challenges. We tend to think that science and technology will offer some miracle solution, but the more you analyse, the clearer it becomes that we need profound socio-economic and cultural changes, as well as a shift in our mentality. Indeed, this mentality is part of the problem: our consumerist behaviour is boundless in its ruthless exploitation of the earth and its inhabitants.

That is why Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato si'*, advocates an 'integrated ecology' (nn. 10, 11, 13 and throughout), in which spirituality plays an essential role. The Pope calls for an 'ecological conversion' (nn. 5, 16, 217, 219, 220), requiring a change in hearts and souls.¹ Ecological

¹ Pope Francis makes a connection here with Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio*, n. 14: 'The development we speak of here cannot be restricted to economic growth alone. To be authentic, it must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man.'

problems—and their solutions—affect everything, all humans, and also the whole human being: hence the need for spirituality.

Spirituality, in fact, opens up our deepest sources of motivation; our difficulties are partly due to a lack of spirituality. Pope Francis quotes his predecessor, Benedict XVI: “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast.” For this reason, the ecological crisis is also a summons to profound interior conversion.’ (n.217) Therefore, if necessary changes are to be sustainable, they must be in keeping with what concerns us most: what has value and meaning for us; how can we be inspired to act? And how can Christian faith help us at this point?

In response to the Pope’s appeal, I propose ten rules for an ecological discernment. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius of Loyola also gives two sets of comments (Exx 313–363) on what can happen inside us if spiritual life is taken seriously: the ups and downs experienced by those who believe and pray. In addition, by means of these ‘rules’, Ignatius wants to ‘help souls’: how do you handle ‘movements of consolation and desolation’, through which you feel you are moving closer to God, or further away?

These ten rules for ecological discernment are in line with Ignatius’ general spiritual rules. They describe the thoughts, feelings and inner movements that can be experienced by those who are committed to ecology, and they show how you can make progress once you have made this basic choice (compare Exx 315). They can be used for both individual and collective discernment. The guidelines do not specify which concrete choices are to be made for the sake of the environment and climate. Ignatius would not have done so either: that is the job of the experts.² But we do share Ignatius’ insight that in order to make good choices, including ecological ones, we must be in a right spiritual attitude—in other words, choices are best made ‘in consolation’ (see Exx 175–178, 318).

Finally, I have deliberately chosen not to make a simple adaptation of Ignatius’ original text. I wanted to reflect as much as possible the experience of those who are committed to the climate and the environment. The guidelines are open to further suggestions: readers may feel free to augment them from their own experience.

² For an overview and analysis of a hundred climate measures, see *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*, edited by Paul Hawken (London: Penguin Random House, 2017). See also the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), at <https://www.ipcc.ch/>.

1. Experiencing life and nature as a gift, feeling gratitude for creation as our common home, is ecological consolation.

At the root of our environmental problems, according to Pope Francis in *Laudato si'*, is the way in which we look at nature. If we see the Earth as an inexhaustible stock of resources that are merely at our disposal, if we consider ourselves as the masters of creation (Genesis 1:28) who are not accountable for our consumption of raw materials, plants or animals, then that will influence the way we treat this planet. And so, Pope Francis tells us, we must change our 'utilitarian' outlook (*Laudato si'*, nn. 115, 159, 210, 219) and learn to see creation as a home that has been given to us and that we share with other humans and other living creatures (nn. 67–68).

One type of consolation, then, is to grow into this insight, experiencing joy over the gift that is life—life which flourishes in us and everywhere around us. This relates to the Ignatian theme of *gratitude* which we meet most notably in the Contemplation to Attain Love—the final chord of the Exercises: 'Here it will be to ask for interior knowledge of all the great good I have received, in order that, stirred to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and serve the Divine Majesty in all things' (Exx 233, and compare 234–235).

Gratitude puts us before the Giver of so many good things. We are in relation to the Giver, and in the Giver, in relation to all creatures. Ecological consolation leads us to appreciate more and more all of these relationships, and balances our positions towards them (*Laudato si'*, n. 69). It will lead to changes in how we treat the environment.



2. Valuing forms of happiness that do not depend on the pursuit of property and being aware of the fact that rhythms and limits may be life-giving is ecological consolation.

Non multa sed multum is a well-known Ignatian motto.³ It relates to the ‘Second Annotation’ in the Spiritual Exercises: ‘For what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and in savouring them interiorly’ (Exx 2). Here I would like to give an ecological twist to this phrase: *less is more*. As a Christian, I refuse to be carried away by a totalitarian economic logic. I do not want to plunder the Earth for wealth in order to assert myself as an individual or as a community. There is no need for this, for there is real joy in a simpler lifestyle.

Ecological consolation goes against various tendencies in contemporary society: the continuous pursuit of economic growth; extensive exploitation of the planet; uncontrolled consumption; our mimetic desire (*what other people have I also want to have*); ‘FOMO’ syndrome—*Fear of Missing Out*. We crave as many experiences as possible, but why not seek for ‘JOMO’—the *Joy of Missing Out*? To achieve that simplicity we may consider the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23). There Ignatius indicates that indeed we do have a limit put on our ‘use’ of earthly things—the principle of *tantum ... quantum*: ‘From this it follows that we ought to use these things *to the extent that they help us toward our end, and free ourselves from them to the extent that they hinder us from it*’. Respect for this limit will help us to ‘praise, reverence and serve God’: the fundamental aim of human life.

3. Growing in virtues such as wisdom, justice, courage and temperance; faith, hope and charity; wonder, patience and empathy; true joy and a sense of humour—and practising them with pleasure—is ecological consolation.

Today’s ecological challenges force us to make choices in extremely complicated matters. For that reason we need firm attitudes that enable us to make good choices in various and changing circumstances. In philosophy and theology, these firm attitudes are called *virtues*.

Ignatius also mentions virtues in his *Spiritual Exercises*. At the end of his description of consolation, for example, he writes:

³ The idea originates in the classical world and versions of it can be found in Pliny and Quintilian.

Finally, under the word consolation I include every increase in hope, faith, and charity, and every interior joy which calls and attracts one toward heavenly things and to the salvation of one's soul, by bringing it tranquillity and peace in its Creator and Lord (Exx 316).

Ignatius refers to 'joy' alongside the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. True consolation always seems to have an element of joy in it. It is a sign that we ourselves are on the right track of ecological conversion, and it is also appealing to others who may want to choose the same path. I am also happy to mention a sense of humour as a virtue.

In the course of the Spiritual Exercises, as we go through the meditations and the contemplations of the four Weeks, Christian and human virtues flourish within us. Increasingly the virtues acquire meaning for us and determine more and more our being and our actions. *Laudato si'*, for its part, speaks of 'ecological virtues' (n.88). A culture that makes space for these virtues is more likely to succeed in making the ecological transition (see, for example, *Laudato si'*, n.224).

4. A desire for action is ecological consolation.

The hallmark of a healthy Christian spirituality is its fruitfulness. Inspired by Jesus, we feel the desire to act and to live in a different way. Ignatius also writes in the Contemplation to Attain Love: 'Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words' (Exx 230). The desire to *do something* when a believer is touched by environmental issues is a form of consolation. We do well to respect that desire. It may indeed be a sign that we need to change our lives.

Laudato si' contains plenty of concrete recommendations for action: reducing and sorting waste, being economical with water, avoiding squandering food (n.206), taking into account our ecological footprint (n.211), all kinds of social, economic and political choices and so on. Pope Francis draws attention even to the smallest gestures, referring to the 'Little Way' of St Thérèse of Lisieux: everyday, loving actions can break through the logic of violence, selfishness and exploitation (n.230).

5. An imaginative exercise for achieving ecological consolation.

Ignatius gives a variety of imaginative exercises to achieve greater freedom and consolation in the process of making choices: think of someone you do not know giving you advice; see yourself lying on your deathbed or standing before God at the Last Judgment—at that moment, what would you like to have done in the course of your past life? (Exx 185–187).

Based on Pope Francis's ideas about integral ecology in *Laudato si'*, I propose a prayer exercise to achieve greater ecological consolation. Consider, in your imagination, future generations; consider the poor and nature: how would they look at us; what would they tell us today? During my prayer I let different voices enter into my heart—the voices of future generations, of the poor and of nature. Because of the complexity of the ecological challenges they need to sit at the negotiating table in order to achieve solutions for our global problems, anyway. Is it helpful to think about them when pondering over this or that choice, while determining a personal or common course of action?

Why choose these particular imaginary interlocutors? First, the Pope extends the concept of 'neighbour' to future generations. Creation is a gift that also belongs to them (*Laudato si'*, n. 159). Thinking of our children and grandchildren is a strong incentive to change our behaviour and mentality. Further, integral ecology cannot be achieved without integrating the perspective of the poor (which receives 61 mentions in *Laudato si'*): their voices must be heard if we are to bring about sustainable change. And last, as the philosopher Michel Serres affirms, nature wants to tell us something through phenomena such as climate change, with science taking on the role of interpreter.⁴

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⁴ See Michel Serres, *Times of Crisis: What the Financial Crisis Revealed and How to Reinvent Our Lives and Future*, translated by Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibn (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 36–48.

6. To think ‘What we do does not matter; the situation is irreversible anyway’, is ecological desolation.

7. To think ‘How could I ever change what I have been doing all my life? I’ll never be able to’, is ecological desolation.

8. To think ‘Others do not act, so why should I?’, or, ‘I’m standing all by myself’, is ecological desolation.

The three rules above describe thoughts that can be classified as ‘ecological desolation’. Ignatius attributes desolation to the workings of the ‘evil spirit’ or the ‘enemy of human nature’. The evil spirit wants to make us feel unnecessarily bad about ourselves, and gives us the impression that even God has abandoned us. The evil spirit often distorts our view of ourselves and our relationship with God, making it one-sided. He breaks down reasons and motivations that allow us to grow in faith, hope and love (see Exx 317).

By ecological desolation I refer to feelings of discouragement which sometimes overwhelm anyone who wants to address ecological problems. You believe that the state of the Earth is hopeless (rule 6). You no longer have faith in your ability to change (rule 7). You feel that you are entirely on your own, and every effort to help the planet and humanity seems insignificant and pointless (rule 8). Ignatius’ description of the soul in a state of desolation seems perfectly appropriate to me:

... an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid, and unhappy, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord. (Exx 317)

How do we counter such feelings? This will be addressed in the next rule.

9. Resist ecological desolation: acknowledge failure and sinfulness, still trusting in God’s mercy. After you fall, you can get up again. We can always start afresh and take a first step.

We want to plead guilty for the current state of the Earth. It is for the most part caused by human behaviour. Likewise, we do not seem to be able to change ourselves despite our good intentions. Our cultural context is so centred on consumption, and it seems so difficult to change mindsets and patterns of behaviour, both in ourselves and in others. Commitment to the environment is tough work, seemingly a losing battle.

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In secular discussions about climate change, notions such as ‘eco-anxiety’ and ‘eco-guilt’ appear—the fear that nothing we do will help, that our efforts are constantly falling short, that we are failing to meet the challenge. From a Ignatian point of view, feelings of fear and guilt are not bad in themselves: they can be warning signs telling us that something is not right in our way of life. Ignatius tells us that God is speaking to us in that way through our conscience: ‘In the case of persons who are going from one mortal sin to another ... the good spirit uses a contrary procedure. Through their good judgment on problems of morality he stings their consciences with remorse.’ (Exx 314)

But what happens when feelings of guilt become paralysing and prevent us from taking responsibility and acting? At that moment, Ignatius would say they are a sign of desolation and come from the evil spirit. In order to resist the feelings of desolation associated with these thoughts, it is important to acknowledge our vulnerability to sin. In the second exercise of the First Week (a meditation on personal sin), Ignatius even asks that we pray for it as a form of consolation: ‘to ask for what I desire ... for growing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins’ (Exx 55).

Spiritual desolation can also come about ‘through our own fault’ (Exx 322); evidently this is also true for ecological desolation. *Laudato si’* shows us many examples of the mistreatment of the Earth that, from a faith perspective, can be qualified as sinful. Pope Francis quotes Patriarch Bartholomew of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Australian Catholic bishops:

Patriarch Bartholomew has spoken in particular of the need for each of us to repent of the ways we have harmed the planet For ‘to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God’. (n.8)

The Australian bishops spoke of the importance of such conversion for achieving reconciliation with creation: ‘To achieve such reconciliation, we must examine our lives and acknowledge the ways in which we have harmed God’s creation through our actions and our failure to act. We need to experience a conversion, or change of heart.’ (n.218)

Sinful attitudes do not only concern interpersonal relationships but also creation: ‘human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself’. But these relationships have been broken by the Fall:

This rupture is sin. The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations. (*Laudato si'*, n. 66)

But the ecologically committed believer can feel strengthened by faith in a merciful God who always wants to give us fresh chances: before God, we can always start with a clean slate, and that is precisely what encourages us to go further along the path we have taken. We need to be merciful and patient with ourselves and with others, as God is patient with us (Exx 321). 'Eco-fundamentalism' or 'eco-extremism' are not helpful in this respect.

In the Spiritual Exercises, retreatants gain a personal experience of God's mercy. The First Week culminates in a cry of joy for the rediscovered life-energy which comes from the deep sense of being forgiven and which opens up new avenues. Ignatius involves the whole of Creation:

This is an exclamation of wonder and surging emotion, uttered as I reflect on all creatures and wonder how they have allowed me to live and have preserved me in life the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and animals. And the earth: How is it that it has not opened up and swallowed me ... ? (Exx 60)

In the Second Week we now can follow a new path of life in the footsteps of Jesus.

The feelings of ecological consolation described in the first five rules are clear signs that we are progressing on the way of 'ecological conversion', avoiding ecological sinfulness and the ecological desolation connected to it. Moreover they also actively help us to tackle ecological desolation. I would like to compare them to Ignatius' own suggestions on how to deal with desolation in Exx 319:

Although we ought not to change our former resolutions in time of desolation, it is very profitable to make vigorous changes in ourselves against the desolation, for example, by insisting more on prayer, meditation, earnest self-examination, and some suitable way of doing penance.

Rules 1 and 5 (and, after this, 10) invite us to pray, and thus to internalise a Christian perspective on creation. In addition, rules 2, 3 and 4 presuppose a conversion from a desolate life of possessiveness and consumption to a consoling, ecologically minded way of life, that is, 'doing penance'.

In the Spiritual Exercises the meditation on the Two Standards is about the choice between a life of riches, worldly honour and pride on the one hand, and a life of poverty, humiliations and humility, advocated by Christ, on the other:⁵

Consider the address which Christ our Lord makes to all his servants and friends whom he is sending on this expedition. He recommends that they endeavour to aid all persons, by attracting them, first, to the most perfect spiritual poverty and also, if the Divine Majesty should be served and should wish to choose them for it, even to no less a degree of actual poverty; and second, by attracting them to a desire of reproaches and contempt, since from these results humility. In this way there will be three steps: the first, poverty in opposition to riches; the second, reproaches or contempt in opposition to honour from the world; and the third, humility in opposition to pride. Then from these three steps they should induce people to all the other virtues. (Exx 146)

We can translate this into ecological terms as follows: following Jesus means consuming less (poverty); renouncing prestige based on appearance and possession (insults and contempt); and cherishing solidarity with God's creation (humility—in Latin *humilitas* is derived from 'humus' or 'earth').

With this in mind, it is also good to appreciate the value of the *first step*. A new, more environmentally conscious life will only start with this one step, a step which is within our capabilities, which will provide us with a small sense of victory but which then will encourage us to continue.

10. The ultimate ecological consolation is receiving the grace to become a mystic of creation.

The ultimate source of spiritual consolation is to be touched by the wonder of creation itself—lifting up our hearts towards the Creator. Pope Francis talks about this in *Laudato si'* n.84, but I would especially like to quote Ignatius of Loyola's own example: 'And the greatest consolation he used to receive was to look at the sky and the stars, which he did often and for a long time, because with this he used to feel in himself a great impetus towards serving Our Lord' (*Autobiography*, n.11). In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius also expresses this sense of wonder in the Contemplation to Attain Love:

⁵ For a different ecological approach to the Two Standards, see Joan Carrera i Carrera and Llorenç Puig, 'Toward an Integral Ecology', *Cristianisme i Justícia*, 165 (October 2017).

I will consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence; and finally, how in this way he dwells also in myself, giving me existence, life, sensation, and intelligence; and even further, making me his temple, since I am created as a likeness and image of the Divine Majesty. (Exx 235)

Here Ignatius appears to have become a *mystic of creation*. Coming to the end of these ‘rules for ecological discernment’, we too can pray and ask for the ecological consolations that can make us true mystics of creation (compare Exx 316): a heart inflamed with love for God’s creative work; tears of wonder at the world’s majesty and beauty of the universe—despite all pollution, injustice and disaster—a deep sense of faith in love for all creatures, both human and non-human.

Walter Ceyskens SJ lives in Leuven and works there as programme coordinator of the Lerkeveld student residence and as spiritual director of the Johannes XXIII diocesan seminary. During the summer of this year he accompanied the Ignatian ‘Ecofriendly’ experiment at the MAGIS Europe event in Lithuania.