



Living a Catholic Life *Stewardship and Dominion*

“Living a Catholic Life” is a collaboration between dioceses, parishes, Knights of Columbus councils, grassroots organizations, and The National Catholic Bioethics Center to educate the laity on principles of the moral life and their application.

While many contemporary movements use the terms *stewardship*, *dominion*, and *autonomy*, the Catholic Church remains rather unique in her employment of all three concepts to help her sons and daughters understand the moral demands of following Christ. While all ethical discourse is relational, not all contemporary ethical discourse is relational in the two senses of being both horizontal and vertical. Human beings have obligations to each other and to the world around them, which is the horizontal dimension of ethics. But we also have obligations to the God above us, which is the vertical dimension. An ethic based on only one dimension—the horizontal ethic of secular humanism, for example—will have a far different look than an ethic based on both. Our study of these three concepts involves us in nothing less than the heart of an authentic Christian anthropology: the human being is indecipherable without a reference to the God who creates and sustains and who shares dominion with his children.

Autonomy is a word often used by philosophers. Thomas Shannon gives a standard definition: “Autonomy is a form of personal liberty of action in which the individual determines his or her course of action in accordance with a plan of his or her own choosing” (*An Introduction to Bioethics*, 4th rev. ed., intro.). As *Gaudium et spes* makes clear, when properly understood, autonomy is in full concordance with the Christian message: “If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. Such is not merely required by modern man, but harmonizes also with the will of the Creator.” Improperly understood, however, autonomy proves destructive of authentic human good: “But if the expression . . . is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear” (Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, n. 36).

Dominion is perhaps best comprehended biblically as human beings’ sharing in the creative action of God in the world: “God created man in his image, in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: ‘Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all living things that move on the earth’” (1:27–28). In a sense, the rest of the Bible is a commentary on this notion. One of the major concerns of Christian moral reflection is to answer the questions

of how God shares his creative action with his creatures and how far human beings’ dominion expands. While it is true that God shares his power and authority with humanity, He never ceases being God, and we never cease being creatures. This lordship of God especially holds true in matters of life and death, where proper human dominion must not be confused with total control: “Human life and death are thus in the hands of God, in his power: ‘In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind,’ exclaims Job (12:10). ‘The Lord brings to death and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up’ (1 Sam. 2:6). He alone can say: ‘It is I who bring both death and life’ (Deut. 32:39)” (John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, n. 39).

Stewardship is part of the continuing commentary on the biblical concept of dominion. Indeed, the good steward is the person who exercises his God-given autonomy and dominion for the good of himself and others entrusted to his care. Here, too, the steward has free range of action, yet this freedom is not unlimited. Stewards are stewards precisely because of their relationship with the master: “The gifts of multidimensional human nature and its natural environment should be used with profound respect for their intrinsic teleology. The gift of human creativity especially should be used to cultivate that nature and environment, with a care set by the limits of human beings’ actual knowledge and the risks of destroying these gifts” (Benedict Ashley and Kevin O’Rourke, *Healthcare Ethics*, 3rd ed., 53).

The general introduction to the US bishops’ *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* is especially illustrative, as it links dominion and stewardship with God’s design for humanity: “Created in God’s image and likeness, the human family shares in the dominion that Christ manifested in his healing ministry. This sharing involves a stewardship over all material creation (Gen. 1:26) that should neither abuse nor squander nature’s resources. Through science the human race comes to understand God’s wonderful work; and through technology it must conserve, protect, and perfect nature in harmony with God’s purposes. Health care professionals pursue a special vocation to share in carrying forth God’s life-giving and healing work.”

While it is obvious that much more needs to be said regarding the three notions we have been investigating, perhaps one line from the Second Vatican Council comes as close as possible to saying it best of all: “Even in secular business there is no human activity which can be withdrawn from God’s dominion” (*Lumen gentium*, n. 36).