

On the dominium terrae

1. According to the orthodox interpretation of the imago Dei, it includes, albeit as pars minus principalis, the so-called dominium terrae of Gen 1:26 ff. "Dominium" is understood here in its root meaning to stand pro jure et potestate dominandi. Being created imago Dei, human beings are authorized, i.e., have both the right and the power, to rule.

2. In the context of Gen 1:26 ff., it seems clear that this rule is intended to be exercised over the lower, nonhuman creatures. But wherein, exactly, does it consist?

3. My suggestion is that it consists in our having the right and the power to establish, maintain, and transform "the smaller local orders that we properly speak of as 'societies' and 'cultures,'" even as God's own rule consists in establishing, maintaining, and transforming "the larger, cosmic order of nature" (Faith and Freedom: 93 f.). Of course, social and cultural order pertains immediately and directly to human creatures, since it is, in effect, the way in which they govern themselves, by creating objective structures that, being internalized, contribute toward creating their own existence. But because human beings are and remain natural beings, whose humanity is simply their way of being natural, the social and cultural orders that they create and that in turn create them necessarily impact all nonhuman creatures as well. Indeed, they are the means whereby human beings actualize their dominion over the whole earth, subduing all the other creatures.

4. The merit of this suggestion is that it includes the specifically political aspect of moral responsibility in our very constitution as human beings. Being created by God in God's own image, we are authorized (i.e., entitled and empowered) not only to lead our own individual lives but also to establish, maintain, and transform the social and cultural orders by which

human lives alone can be lived, but which also impact the lives of all the nonhuman creatures for which we also bear responsibility. In this sense, the dominium terrae to which human beings are appointed and called in relation to their fellow creatures is always to be exercised "after the image of God's own loving rule--so as not merely to use and exploit them but also to enjoy and to further them as co-participants in the all-inclusive end of God's reign" (114).

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