

“THE ENTIRE CREATION IS WITHIN THEM”:
GENDER, ECOLOGY, AND *VIRIDITAS* AS LIVED RELIGION

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Abstract

There is a certain relational quality, a “greenness,” that underlies experiences of the social, the ecological, and the divine. This “greenness,” as I present it here, is material and physiological, involving the generative energy shared between human bodies and ecosystems. But it is also spiritual, and deeply relational, in that it suggests the interconnectedness of life beyond the physical. Notably, this sense of “greenness” was identified long ago by a medieval nun, Hildegard von Bingen, who named it *viriditas*. Here, I expand on Hildegard’s use of *viriditas*, redefining it as sociological descriptor which indicates a phenomenology of the relational alive. *Viriditas* is both a recognition of relationships that tie the social to the ecological and the Durkheimian propensity to experience qualities of society reflected in nature and conceptions of the divine. As such, *viriditas* contributes to the field of “lived religion,” and its feminist approach, which elevates experiences of everyday people in spaces outside of official religious institutions. Here, I examine accounts of *viriditas* at Sinsinawa Mound, a community of Catholic nuns in southwest Wisconsin. In this ethnography, I explore their environmental and agricultural history as it has situated agroecosystems within the Catholic sacramental imagination. By defining *viriditas* in this way, I invite environmental, agroecological, and ecofeminist perspectives into the study of lived religion. *Viriditas* offers a view through the lens of the Catholic sacramental imagination, examining a relational, socially reflective, and ecological world.

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For my grandmother, Elizabeth English,

January 13, 1938 – April 22, 2020

with all my love.

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“Under this is a sense of all the relationships that help to make a place green, rather than a place that has no life,” Sister Alice Ann reminded us. These relationships underlie a phenomenon that has many names: the sense of connection, the presence, the spirit, the feeling of “greenness” that inhabits all living beings.

“It takes many creatures to make a forest. Those of you who grew up in farm area know it takes many creatures to keep land fertile,” Alice Ann continued. The four other women with us, listening, nodded their heads.

Per usual pandemic era precautions, we were meeting over Zoom. Six women, two generations, mosaiced on the screen. I had asked these five Catholic nuns to join me virtually that day, but I think we all felt the strangeness, the irony of talking about relationships and “greenness” as we were reduced to isolated gray boxes in a video conference.

To clarify, Alice Ann’s allusion to “greenness” is material and physiological, implying moisture, fertility, and the exchange of energy in ecosystems. But it is also spiritual, and deeply relational, in that it suggests the interconnectedness of life beyond the physical.

She folded her hands on the table in front of her, and after a pause, began again, “When you see land that’s turning to desert, you begin to cry. And maybe the tears are what will eventually bring moisture back. But we, as humans, will deplete the greenness if we don’t learn about relationship.” She was the poet of the group, we all decided. For here again, she had described a sense of “greenness” that ties together the ecological and the social—relational in every sense.

The sisters here understood this “greenness” within the context of their Catholic faith, inextricable from their appreciation for the environment and their ties to agriculture. What I have come to understand is that when Alice Ann, and her sisters, talked about “relationship,” they referred to a deeper kind of multifaceted, phenomenological connection—to God, to other people, and to the land. This “greenness” is an experience, both social and ecological; it

is an embodied reflection of the environment and the relationality of everything sacred and alive.

...

I. Introduction

Contextualizing *Viriditas* in Lived Religion, a Durkheimian Approach

“Greenness” in this sense was identified long ago. In the twelfth century, Hildegard von Bingen called it *viriditas*. The nuns I spoke with were indeed familiar with Hildegard’s work, sometimes using *viriditas* and sometimes using other words—such as presence, spirit, energy, mystery, or relationship—to describe this lived experience. Here, I define *viriditas* as a phenomenology of the relational alive. It is both a recognition of all the relationships that tie the social to the ecological and the Durkheimian propensity to experience qualities of society as reflected in nature and conceptions of the divine.

As such, *viriditas* contributes to the field of “lived religion” (Hall 1997). This branch of the sociology of religion explores the everyday experiences of the divine, typically outside official religious institutions and calling attention to “people on the margins” (Ammerman 2016). In doing so, accounts of lived religion often amplify the voices of women. Scholars and practitioners of lived religion work to challenge the notion of the “religious field” (Dianteill 2003) as it stands, bounded by institutional hierarchy and belief. This “field” in the Bordieuan sense has largely excluded the value of “everyday practices of sacralization” (Ammerman 2016, Edgell 2012), that which lived religion attempts to elevate.

Further, lived religion largely focuses on narrative, experience, and practice rather than doctrine, dogma, or institutional organization. In this case, nuns, or women religious, hold a unique place in the institution of the Catholic Church. Note that *women religious* is a common way to refer to those who are vowed members of a Catholic order of nuns, used to

distinguish them from *religious women*, that is, lay women who identify with a religious faith. I will use women religious, nuns, and sisters interchangeably here.

So, while communities of women religious are indeed considered official extensions of the Catholic Church, they function outside the ecclesial hierarchy of male clergy. Women religious are “on the margins” in the sense that they are excluded from the priesthood, hold less ecclesial authority than members of the male Church, and live under their own governance. For these reasons, among others, nuns may experience and prioritize different aspects of Catholic tradition and practice. Sarah McFarland Taylor (2007), for example, has examined how North American nuns have worked to integrate environmental stewardship, education, and justice into Catholic life and mission. Similarly, I conducted this ethnography of Sinsinawa Mound, a community of Catholic nuns located in southwest Wisconsin, to examine Catholic environmentalism through a sociological, “lived” religious lens.

I wondered: are women religious indeed more likely to invest themselves in environmental justice efforts, compared to the male clergy, because of their position within the Church? I believe the lived religion perspective offers some explanation for this apparent gender division within (institutional) Catholic environmentalism. In the attempt to answer that question, however, I came to identify a more generalizable phenomenon—the “greenness,” or *viriditas*, in question. Functionally, *viriditas* serves as an invitation to bring such environmental dimensions into the study of lived religion.

Nancy Ammerman (2016) has outlined three analytical dimensions of lived religion: embodiment, discourse, and materiality. Likewise, these dimensions are relevant to a phenomenological understanding of *viriditas*. Thus, *viriditas* is embodied, it is expressed through metaphor and analogy (discourse), and it is situated in place (materiality). Lived religion provides a relational perspective and a form of feminist analysis, as it attends to

narrative, identity, practice, and relationship (Neitz 2004). Following this precedent, I consider *viriditas* from an *ecofeminist* perspective.

Therefore, I present *viriditas* as a feminist concept, but not necessarily a feminine one. It was in these nuances of gender, sexuality, and embodiment that the discourse of sisters at Sinsinawa Mound truly led the way. I observed how the symbolism built into conceptions of both nature and the divine—Earth as Mother and Sister, God as Father, and myriad metaphors concerning sexual reproduction—informed the nuns’ experiences of *viriditas*, but did not limit them. These metaphors have undoubtedly influenced communities of women religious, as well as official Church writings, namely Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si’* (see Appendix A). Nuns at Sinsinawa Mound maintained that there is value in reclaiming feminine symbolism in cooperation with the masculine, but granted that those images certainly do not, and cannot, reflect the full experience of nature, nor God. So, rather than categorizing *viridis* experience within binary understandings of gender, my hope is that *viriditas* may instead open space to consider phenomenologies and environmental relationships beyond the gender binary when working within the Catholic sacramental imagination.

In Durkheimian tradition, lived religion is treated as collective and *reflective* experience. And, as the experience of the divine reflects that of society (Durkheim 2004/1915), so too can nature (as sacred) reflect experiences of society and the self. Thus, *viriditas* encompasses this relationship, acting as the mirror between sacred nature and the relational self.

Lived religion is also geographically situated, occurring in contexts outside the explicitly religious sphere (Ammerman 2016; Bergmann 2008; Kupari 2020; Streib 2008). *Viriditas* as lived religion, therefore, is readily encountered in such extra-institutional, everyday spaces. Here, I consider ecosystems, specifically agricultural systems or

agroecosystems, as relevant everyday spaces in which *viriditas* is experienced. I argue that agriculture holds particular significance for understanding *viriditas*, both in the original naming of the concept and in the situated experiences of sisters at Sinsinawa Mound today. Their community's agricultural history and farming practices have effectively placed agroecosystems within the Catholic sacramental imagination. Farming as practice, therefore, becomes ritual as it is sacralised and sacramental, ripe for *viridis* experience and demonstrative of the situated character of lived religion.

Hildegard von Bingen & the Origin of *Viriditas*

As I define *viriditas* in the context of Sinsinawa Mound, I also look to its origins and the medieval nun who first defined it. Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179) was a German Benedictine abbess and a celebrated Catholic visionary. One of several known Rhineland mystics, Hildegard was a prolific and multidisciplinary writer, producing works of theology, natural philosophy, medicine, and musical composition. She was declared a saint in 1979. And in 2012, she was named a Doctor of the Church, one of just four women to hold that title (Benedictus 2012).

Although highly educated, nuns of the Middle Ages had little to no ecclesial authority, thus excluding them from theological writing and preaching. Hildegard's role as visionary and prophet, then, was possibly a requisite strategy for her to share her theological and scientific knowledge. Margret Berger (1999), for one, has argued that it was only once the Church recognized Hildegard's source of knowledge as revealed by God, as *visio*, was she then permitted to record her visions in writing and share them publicly (p. 8).

Viriditas is a recurring theme throughout Hildegard's work, but is perhaps most clear in *Cause et cure*, a twofold medical and theological text. Like many medical writers of the time, she relied on macro/microcosmic imagery to explain anatomy, physiology, illness, and treatment by comparing such human processes to nature and the cosmos (Berger, M. 1999).

In her writings, *viriditas* served as a foundation for these macro/microcosmic relationships, functioning as a shared sense of life and generative energy. Hildegard identified that energy, materially and spiritually, in parallels between the health and function of the human body and the innerworkings of nature (Berger, M. 1999). That is, these comparisons were physical—describing the biology and ecology of the body—as well as theological and symbolic. As a generative energy granted by God, *viriditas* represented the spiritual connections between all beings of creation. Its antithesis is *ariditas*, a drying or withering energy associated with illness and decay, as well as with sin (Newman 2020). Sister Alice Ann provided a vivid account this “dryness” when she articulated, “When you see land that’s turning to desert, you begin to cry. And maybe the tears are what will eventually bring moisture back. But we, as humans, will deplete the greenness if we don’t learn about relationship.” Thus, *ariditas* describes a destructive force, one that manifests in the physical consequences of environmental degradation, as well as in the emotional and social ills that arise from ruptured relationships. Those relationships can be between humans, between society and nature, or between the human and the divine.

Conversely, *viriditas* is inherently relational, both in the core of its definition and as a mode of its expression. In typical medieval style, Hildegard used metaphor, almost formulaically, in her medical writing to describe the innerworkings of the human body in relation to the environment. *Viriditas*, therefore, was repeatedly expressed through metaphor and analogy as well. For, as Emile Durkheim ventured, “social life, in all its aspects and in every period of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism” (2004/1915).

It is not unusual for the human body to be used as metaphor or map for social relationships, symbolizing several levels of meaning at once (McGuire 1990; Taylor 2007). Consider Hildegard’s description of the creation of Adam (note that *viriditas* has been translated to “greenness”): “When God sent into it the breath of life, this matter consisting of

bones, marrow and blood vessels was strengthened by this breath that divided itself into that mass, just as a worm crawls into its home and as greenness is in a tree” (Berger, M. 1999, p. 40). Like this, Hildegard defined bodily processes by analogy. This excerpt also demonstrates just as well how her writing fluidly combined theological and medical commentary.

Since Durkheim, sociologists have recognized that “human bodies are important symbols of cultural and social structural meanings.... its parts, its postures, its functions are linked with conceptions of the self and its relationship to a larger material and social environment” (McGuire 1990). I maintain that this observation holds true in Hildegard’s treatment of the body. Per medieval convention, Hildegard ascribed to the Galenic theory of medicine (Berger, M. 1999), or humorism, according to which she understood the body to be composed of four elements (earth, fire, air, and water), each element corresponding to its appropriate “humor.” As a result, the body expressed certain humoral qualities, relating to disposition, temperature, moisture, and bodily fluid, such as blood, bile, or phlegm. A balance of the four humors would bring health and good temperament. Conversely, a humoral imbalance would cause illness and aberrant behavior. Diet, season, and age, among other variables, could affect this humoral balance. Hildegard’s understanding of the body, its interaction with nature, and thus *viriditas* as well, was heavily influenced by these humoral assumptions. In *Cause et Cure*, she wrote:

In this way human beings carry everything because the entire creation is within them. With the humans’ flesh, earth manifests coldness in their warmth, warmth in their coldness, greenness in their growth, dryness in their decay, life-giving in their fruitfulness, sustenance as they multiply, compassion in the support of all members of their bodies. Human beings draw their sensitive nature and their longing from fire, their thinking and journeying from air, their knowledge and motion from water. (Berger, M. 1999, p. 36)

In Hildegard’s view, the body composed of these elements acted as a microcosm of creation. Directly, “The entire creation is within them,” she observed. Further, with this humoral understanding of earth, Hildegard detailed the “greenness in their growth, dryness in

their decay,” establishing the relationship between *viriditas* and *ariditas* as antithetical forces working at all levels of life. As Walt Whitman (1892) embraced such contradictions to declare, “I am large, I contain multitudes,” Hildegard too concluded that the body contains “the entire creation.”

Notably, Hildegard’s metaphors were inspired by experiences of everyday life, comparing bodily processes to worms burying in soil, flowering trees, withering leaves, ploughing soil, damming rivers, kindling fires, germinating seeds, and so on. It was common linguistic practice of medical writers of the Middle Ages to do so (Berger, M. 1999, p. 126), giving particular attention to agricultural experience and imagery. Victoria Sweet (1999) has connected Hildegard’s humorism more deeply to its agricultural origins, noting that fire, water, earth, and air were rarely abstract in her writing, but were more likely conceived as everyday elements, such as sun, rain, land, and wind. Likewise, *viriditas* represented the analogous abilities of plants to germinate, bloom, and fruit and of human bodies to grow, reproduce, and heal, effectively linking the practices of medicine and farming. Such observations held a materiality and immediacy for Hildegard, directly relating the balance—or disruption—of the elements present in the field or garden to those within the human body (Sweet 1999). In this way, Hildegard’s usage of *viriditas* invited, to some extent, the practice of agriculture into the Catholic sacramental imagination. Accounts of *viridis* experience today, I will argue, further place the agroecosystem within this religious sphere. The origins and experiences of *viriditas* are not extraordinary, but quotidian. Hildegard’s choices speak to an everyday, embodied religion, as well as to a relational and ecological one.

In the largest sense, *viriditas* is a shared phenomenon of the body, nature, and the cosmos. In a particular sense, it is tied to fertility and sexual reproduction. In *Cause et cure*, Hildegard paid significant attention to the *viridis* energy underlying processes of menstruation, conception, and birth within the female body. *Viriditas*, therefore, also holds a

generative quality, one that is present in the reproductive cycle, but is equally relevant to non-sexual processes, such as healing, growth, or the generation of knowledge and ideas (Berger, M. 1999).

Even still, when made synonymous with fertility, as it often was, *viriditas* is gendered as phenomenologically feminine. However, Hildegard equally recognized “virile” *viriditas* (Berger, M. 1999). Therefore, it is important to note that *viriditas* and its opposite, *ariditas*, do not exist on a feminine/masculine binary. In other words, Hildegard did not offer *ariditas* as the masculine counterpart to a feminine *viriditas*, since the capacity for *viriditas* exists in all living beings, regardless of gender or sex.

I have defined *viriditas* in these terms, but I do not presume that a sense of the relational alive, in its ecological, social, or religious sense, is unique to Catholicism. Similar concepts exist in many other world religions. Nor do I mean to suggest that the experience is exclusive to religious tradition of any kind. That is, I see great opportunity for secular phenomenologies of the relational alive. That being said, I work within the framework of Catholic tradition—of “lived” Catholicism and the sacramental imagination—here because it is from which the particulars of this phenomenology emerged for me.

Identifying this sense of the relational alive, that which *viriditas* represents, historically rooted in Catholic theology brought a continuity and a resonance to the words of the Catholic sisters I know today. Hildegard von Bingen recognized this *viridis* phenomenon in the twelfth century, just as people in the twenty-first century may come to know it.

What underlies this capacity to experience the relational quality of life? Why do humans continue to compare themselves to—and see themselves reflected in—the natural world? Humans are creatures of metaphor. And this tendency toward analogy links the personal to the social, the social to the ecological, and to the divine. I intend to stay true to Hildegard’s original purpose for *viriditas*, that is, to denote the generative, relational energy,

its presence and parallels, within and between living beings. I also build upon Hildegard's usage, redefining it as a phenomenological, sociological descriptor. This understanding of *viriditas* demonstrates a lived religion, one that is embodied, expressed through metaphorical discourse, and materially situated in agroecosystems.

Viriditas & Enchantment

In defining *viriditas* as an ecological strand of lived religion, I see it relating to matters of 'enchantment.' I will premise this, however, by clarifying that *viriditas* should not be mistaken for enchantment. When Max Weber (2020/1917) diagnosed the "disenchantment of the world," *Entzauberung der Welt*, he presented a vision of an increasingly intellectualized and rationalized society, thus leaving the modern era devoid of meaning and mystery. The consequence, Weber (2020/1917) argued, is an impassable rift between science and religion, or rather, scientific rationalism and religious rationalism (Koshul 2005). Notably, as Weber described it, disenchantment also held explicit anti-Catholic sentiments, as it worked to rob the sacraments of their 'magic' (Reitter & Wellmon 2020). *Viriditas*, however, lives comfortably in the science-religion intersection. It is simultaneously religious and ecological, both theological and physiological.

Weber's treatment of disenchantment is ambiguous past its application to individual meaning. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002/1947) later outlined the consequences of disenchantment more clearly on the societal scale, positing that such a worldview effectively condones the domination of nature and then presents, falsely, that domination as the acceptable and inevitable order of things. As such, H.C. Greisman (1976) described disenchantment from a Marxist perspective as, "a sinister mask for bourgeois ambitions which replace an antique kind of domination with a modern one" (p. 499). Carolyn Merchant (1980) also argued along these lines, paralleling the domination of nature to the domination of women.

In Horkheimer and Adorno's view, this disenchanted paradigm paradoxically breeds a new enchantment, one that "mystifies" subsets of society as they accept the absurdities and inequalities of modernity as rational and intrinsic, when in fact they are historically designed and mutable (Greisman 1976, Stone 2006). The perceived meaning of 'enchanted' nature is similarly "mythified" in ways that affirm the existing social structure, thus concealing and prolonging human domination over nature and the hierarchical societies which underly it (Stone 2006). Starting from a disenchanted worldview, therefore, any attempt at re-enchantment would predicate on this 'Enlightened' system of domination. Following this logic, there can be no return to enchantment in the modern era.

While not a direct response to disenchantment, the lived religion perspective does work to contradict a disenchanted view of the world. *Viriditas*, however, is not enchantment, nor an attempt at re-enchantment. It is not even a case of re-emergence, for the experience of the relational alive has never really left society in the first place. My field work at Sinsinawa Mound demonstrates that the cultural recognition of such *viridis* experience has ebbed and flowed, particularly in relation to agriculture and conceptions of nature, but never disappeared entirely. So too, defining *viriditas* in terms of lived religion provides a more appropriate context for a phenomenology that is at once relational, embodied, situated, and reflective.

Lived Religion at Sinsinawa Mound: An Agricultural History

Viriditas as I understand it has emerged from ethnographic data gathered at Sinsinawa Mound. "The Mound," as it is often referred to, is centered in a 450 acre stretch of land, home to a community of Catholic nuns. Located in the unglaciated "driftless" region of southwest Wisconsin, the Mound visibly protrudes from the flat expanse of farmland surrounding it (see Appendix B).

The Dominican community of Sinsinawa was founded in 1847 by Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, an Italian-born pioneer priest. As a rural congregation, sisters were acquainted with the land not just by living on it, but by living off it as well. Nuns, aided by local men, managed extensive gardens, row crops, orchards, prize dairy herds, and chickens. Their subsistence farming continued, to varying extents, for nearly a century.

Following the Second World War, as agriculture across the nation became increasingly industrialized, many rural congregations transitioned away from subsistence farming, or farming altogether. Sinsinawa Mound proved to be an exception to this pattern. Instead, entering the 1960s, the sisters further invested in farming, building new infrastructures to support their agricultural efforts. At the same time, many sisters there came into greater (agro)ecological awareness as environmental movements across the United States emerged (Taylor 2007; personal communication).

By the 1980s, in the midst of the Farm Crisis, the Sinsinawa community had reaffirmed their commitments to agriculture and environmental stewardship. In 1982, the community drafted their first directional statement concerning the land, in which they agreed “to promote the continued practice of stewardship of the land, and the study, in cooperation with the neighboring communities, of possible new models of land use.” (SWWRPC 2016b, p. 25). In doing so, they began to embrace the land as extension of their mission (see Appendix C), therefore welcoming agricultural and environmental concerns into the sacramental imagination. Nearly 50 years later, the Sinsinawa community continues to develop their strategic plans for land ministry, laying out the following vision for a Sinsinawa Land Ethic:

Sinsinawa Mound is a significant geological formation in the driftless region of southwest Wisconsin. This sacred site offers a unique biodiverse setting in which present and future generations will deepen their understanding and practice of just relationships with Earth: wetlands, prairie, woodlands, stone, food and farming, wildlife, and humans. We Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa presently hold this place in

trust. The values of truth, justice, compassion, partnership, and community will help shape its movement into the future with care and respect. (SWWRPC 2016b, pp. 8-9)

Following their Land Stewardship Plan, developed 2014-2016, the Sinsinawa community currently manages several native oak savanna restoration sites, solar panel installations, a rotational grazing program, 200 acres of organic farmland, and additional acreage dedicated to the Mound Gardens and a Collaborative Farm.

Their land ministry efforts hold particular weight, and urgency, due to challenges their community will very soon face. Namely, the sisters' population is declining. Sinsinawa records reported 145 sisters living at the Mound in 2016, comprising 32% of the congregation's total population (SWWRPC 2016a). Many residents of the Mound live in skilled care and assisted living facilities. Consequently, they predict that this subset of the population will grow in proportion to the total population, as the average age of the community rises, resulting in a substantial overall decline in total population by 2030 (SWWRPC 2016a). Recognizing the gravity of these projections, and their significance to land ministry efforts, their 2016 strategic plan stated:

These numbers, both their overall decrease and the accompanying increase in age, require the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters to discern how best to ensure their land and buildings are managed in accordance with their values once they are no longer able to manage it themselves. The Sinsinawa Dominicans face a certainty in declining numbers, and an uncertainty as to how their Mission will be carried out in the future.” (SWWRPC 2016a, pg. 8)

The sisters have therefore begun to decide the legacy they wish to leave on the land. Underlying their decisions is a socio-environmental ethic, one derived from lived experience on the land they currently inhabit. It is in this context that I consider *viriditas* as situated, lived religion and a phenomenology of the relational alive.

Methodology: Collaboration in Unpredictable Times

I first visited Sinsinawa Mound in early February 2020. It was a bitterly cold day, but the sky was bright blue and open. I had spoken with Sister Christin Tomy over the phone to

propose my research project, and she invited me for a visit. Christin is a vibrant and thoughtful sister in her thirties who was then working as the Coordinator of Sustainable Agriculture Initiatives at the Mound. She met me with a hug as I arrived that day. After a tour of the grounds, we sat down for lunch in the community dining room with a few of her fellow sisters and Sinsinawa staff members, all of whom I would later get to know much better through emails and interviews. We discussed the parameters of the research, delving straight into questions about land, Catholic environmentalism, women in agriculture, and more. Conversation flowed easily and enthusiastically. I felt immediately welcome.

That was my first and only visit to the Mound for many months, as the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly spread throughout the country and we retreated into quarantine. And with many sisters over the age of 65, the Sinsinawa community was particularly vulnerable.

I realized that the pandemic would pose unprecedented methodological challenges. I was determined to conduct this research in a collaborative and participatory way, following methodology that valued “grounded” and “situated” knowledge (Ashwood, Harden, Bell & Bland 2014; Haraway 1988). So, I worried how I would do that if I could not be “situated” in the perspective of my participants, nor “grounded” and physically present on the land at Sinsinawa. A “view from somewhere” quickly became a view from my computer screen (Haraway 1988).

In spite of these limitations, or perhaps because of them, this research became increasingly collaborative, as I relied on my participants to take a greater role in the research process itself. Adapting to these circumstances, I designed this research as a participatory ethnography, combining archival research, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and collaborative videography.

During the early months of the pandemic, I relied exclusively on virtual communication and file sharing. I began my research in the Sinsinawa Mound archives,

communicating with the archivist and Sister Christin Tomy, who had volunteered to sort through and share relevant material with me via email and Zoom video conferencing. I received digital copies of selected archived material, including newspaper articles, photographs, oral history transcripts, farm logs, maps, and other documents relating to the agricultural and land ministry efforts at the Mound. These documents provided a valuable look into their local agricultural and environmental history, largely spanning the 20th century.

I began interviewing participants in June 2020 and continued until October 2020. I conducted semi-structured interviews primarily over the phone or via Zoom video conferencing. By September, I was permitted to conduct in-person interviews at the Sinsinawa Collaborative Farm, following safety guidelines. Of the participants I interviewed, five are sisters, five are farmers, and three are Sinsinawa staff members. I completed a total of 16 interviews during this stage. The central themes of this thesis emerged during the transcription, coding, and organization of interview data via qualitative analysis.

A second priority of this research was to collect video footage to feature in a short documentary film presenting Sinsinawa Mound's environmental justice mission to a wider audience. I organized several brainstorming sessions with a subset of my participants to determine the scope and message of the film. Again, the videography process was unexpectedly, and fortunately, made more participatory because of Covid-19 restrictions. As I was unable to visit the Mound for many months, Sister Christin Tomy volunteered to document daily farm activities herself through photographs and video footage. Later, in the fall of 2020, I collected additional video footage myself at the Collaborative Farm and periphery areas, including restored prairie sites, forest trails, and pasture. I edited our combined video footage using iMovie software while collaborating with participating sisters and Sinsinawa communications staff during several rounds of community input and feedback. The final product is a short film presenting the agricultural history and current agroecological

work of the nuns and farmers at the Sinsinawa Mound. Titled “Spirit of the Land,” the film is available on YouTube. The link and further information are provided in Appendix D.

II. *Viriditas* as Lived Religion

Women Religious & the Heartbeat of the Church

The lived religion approach is considered neo-Durkheimian in the sense that it elevates the importance of the sacred in everyday practice and experience outside official religious institutions (Ammerman 2016; Edgell 2012). And because of this extra-institutional focus, it is important to address the unique institutional position held by women religious. Religious communities—of women or men—are either diocesan, meaning their chain of authority is to the local bishop, or papal, which simply put, means they are responsible only to the Pope. Of course, papal communities navigate relationships on the local level, but this distinction ultimately allows them more autonomy and decision-making power. Sinsinawa Mound, notably, is a papal community.

Sister Christin Tomy offered her perspective, “I think communities of women, women religious, do exist a little more at the periphery of the institutional Church, and we see ourselves as being called to exist in that liminal zone.” Clearly, Catholic sisters are publicly affiliated with the institutional Church, but are “not at the heart of the ecclesial entity,” Christin explained. “And we don’t want to be there, by and large. We want to be in the zone where people have been marginalized...in that uncomfortable zone where the Church is called to be.”

The segregation of men and women religious in the Church shapes the discourse within and between these gendered communities. In the United States, one relevant example is the historical rift in the understanding and prioritization of environmentalism between so-called “green sisters” (Taylor 2007) and the male hierarchy of the Church. In the past three

decades at least, these sisters have faced condemnations of nature worship, paganism, and New Age invasions—by Pope John Paul II, no less (Cowell 1993)—as the Church was concerned that an ecofeminist turn was non-Catholic, or even means to undermine traditional Catholic teachings (de Aviz 2014). Sisters' work to prioritize environmental concerns and the treatment of nature as sacred were not animist-inspired attempts at re-enchantment, but rather a call to care for earth as God's creation, and in some cases, a form of feminist resistance to the patriarchal systems within and without the Catholic Church (Taylor 2007). So, despite the criticism and skepticism, nuns and Catholic feminist groups have continued to invest themselves in environmental justice and advocacy work more frequently, and more visibly, than their male counterparts (Taylor 2007). However, sisters at Sinsinawa Mound have noted that accusations of nature worship and paganism feel like less of a threat these days, which, in their opinion, has much to do with Pope Francis publishing his environmentally-focused encyclical, *Laudato si'*, in 2015.

Still, sisters at Sinsinawa have linked the lingering disparity in environmental justice efforts to the gendered structure of the Church. In their view, it is the male Church's liturgical duties that tie them more strictly to scripture, doctrine, and dogma. Whereas women religious hold a more flexible role, allowing them to explore broader applications of their faith, in conversation with their fellow sisters, and to gain a better feel for the *sensus fidelium*, "the sense of the faithful," that is, how the Catholic faith is shaped by priorities of modern, everyday people. I would go further to say that nuns are then more likely to encounter and operate within the "lived" religious sphere. Along these lines, Taylor (2007) has concluded, "Despite women's exclusion from official positions of leadership within the hierarchical Church, these women demonstrate their efficacy as active producers and shapers of religious culture at the grassroots level" (p. 182).

A good metaphor, Sister Christin offered, is to envision the Church functioning like a heartbeat. “Right, this is even how, as Catholics, we’re supposed to envision the sacramental life of the Church. We go in, we are nourished, and we go out. We come in and we go out.” Christin moved her hands back and forth, demonstrating a ‘heartbeat’ motion as she spoke. “We envision ourselves more here,” gesturing to the outermost point of the heartbeat’s range.

Living on the periphery, however, often limits the voice, influence, and decision-making capacity of women religious within the male-dominated ‘heart’ of the Church. “I don’t have a lot of hope of things changing in a significant way any time soon, but I also think that women religious are pretty used to finding the niche in which we can do our work with integrity and some degree of autonomy,” Christin concluded.

For the sisters, that integrity and autonomy manifests in their mission. The Dominican mission is dedicated to “preaching and teaching,” actions which the Sinsinawa community has come to relate more deeply to environmental stewardship and education (Dominican Sisters 2021; see Appendix C). Therefore, their land ministry efforts, including sustainable agriculture, solar energy production, prairie restoration, and ecological education programming, among others, all demonstrate lived religion as practice. These sisters pursue such practices in order to build relationships that “make a place green” and ensure that the health of the land will continue even after the Sinsinawa community is no longer there. Therefore, *viriditas* further brings environmental concerns and practices into the sacramental imagination. Through such practice, and discourse, the sisters have demonstrated a narrative of relationship with nature as something regenerative, ecological, and sacred.

Where practice and discourse intersect, lived religion also examines dimensions of identity and relationship. As Durkheim defined religion as relational, “an eminently collective thing” (2004/1915), scholars of lived religion define the self in the same manner. Neitz (2004) has observed how “relational identities are expressed through narrative” (p.

397), assuming that “people are guided to act by the relationships in which they are embedded and the stories with which they choose to identify” (p. 398). So too, sisters at Sinsinawa Mound have embedded themselves in stories, many of which concern relationship to the land.

View from Sinsinawa Mound: Relationality & Reflection

One day in early September, Land Stewardship Director at the time, Ronald Lindblom showed me the progress his team had made on their native prairie restoration project at the Mound. I had come just in time to see the oak savanna’s remaining yellow and purple flowers before they faded into the cold months ahead. Ronald, a slender, silver-haired man, a worn bandanna tied around his neck, motioned toward the swath of prairie to the right of us. As an ecologist, he told me that he first explained the process of prairie restoration to the sisters using an analogy:

I use the analogy of a sick person, and I use the analogy of an older generation, which [the sisters], unfortunately, can relate to. So, if you look out here, we’ve got incredible remnants of oak savanna, which are the big oak trees all through the forest. There are no oak trees under 100 years old, so there’s no next generation coming. Why is that?

It is because oak savanna depends on fire, grazing, or other ecological disturbances in order to thrive. Without such disturbance, prairie transitions to forest. So, what was once robust oak savanna at Sinsinawa Mound, is now shaded woodland, as the land there has been relatively ‘stable,’ without disturbance, for many decades. Thus, as the sisters witnessed their own decline in numbers, they observed the diminishing oak savanna in parallel. “We have remnant oak savanna now, but in 50 years, we wouldn’t. Those old trees are dying, just dying of old age.” Ronald sighed, “Well [the sisters] can relate to that, right? With how hard we’re trying to get young sisters here.”

One of those young sisters, Christin, shared the same metaphor with me, acknowledging the increased frequency of funerals happening at the Mound. Many of the

non-native trees cut down during the restoration process had held sentimental value for the sisters, she explained. The loss of those trees worked to magnify the sense of grief in the community. “Depending on who you talk to, it’s really well-timed or really ill-timed. We’re either paving the way for hope and new life, or we’re just compounding the graves. Maybe both.” From Christin’s perspective, “as a newer, younger sister, it’s incredibly significant. My personal grief and loss are profound. It’s connected to these women whom I love, many of whom will no longer be alive in 10-15 years.” These metaphors, mirrored images of sisters and trees, therefore became means of processing immense grief and anxiety within their community. The sisters’ identity is relational, not only to each other as a congregation, but also to the land as an ecology they have worked to restore. In a Durkheimian sense, the sisters, and Ronald, looked out at the land and saw a reflection of themselves.

This is a different sort of *viridis* relationship, one that imparts the kind of generative energy, the “greenness” associated with reproduction and birth, to a regeneration found in death. As an aging community looking to foster new life, they have identified the *viriditas* in the *ariditas*, the restoration in the destruction, on their land and within their own community of sisters. It is fitting, for what aim resonates deeper in the sacramental imagination than that of new life from death?

The sisters’ narrative has pointed to a deep relationality with the land. As Sister Sheila Fitzgerald told me earlier that summer, “When you think about the land, it’s the source of everything. It’s our physical nourishment. But because we live in, and are surrounded by, the beauty of Sinsinawa, it is also a spiritual nourishment where we’ve connected our soul to the natural environment.”

Taylor (2007) has borrowed a bioregionalist phrase, “to reinhabit,” defined as the process of “engaging the features of the landscape, the climate, and all the interconnected ecological variables of place in order to reshape culture and society, and ultimately, the ways

of being in or relating to that place” (p. 62). *Viriditas* acts as liaison between this sense of “reinhabiting” and lived religion. It works, in Sheila’s words, “to connect the sense of the place, a sacred place, to the spiritual needs of people’s hearts and minds.” It is “where the spirit dwells and the gospel lives,” she added. “And the spirit we’re reflecting is the spirit of the holy, the mystery, the God within, the God without, the God around.” *Viriditas* exemplifies this spirit—one that is situated in place, reflective, and embodied (Ammerman 2016).

III. An Ecofeminist Approach to *Viriditas*

Bodies & Binaries

Sheila spoke of *viriditas* in her own words: it is about “spirit” and “soul,” but also about the material “nourishment” of the body. Young bodies, old bodies, women bodies, men bodies, all bodies—*bodies* participate in lived religion. Embodiment, and the gendering of bodily experience, has therefore been explored in the study of lived religion (King 1995; McGuire 1990, 2016; Neitz 2004). Lived religion’s focus on practice and discourse, which are more likely to be observably gendered than beliefs, “gives sociologists of religion new ways for thinking about how gender and sexuality are at the core of religion.” (Neitz 2004, p. 400). Further, Ursula King (1995) has reiterated how religious institutions and systems both reflect and reinforce social structures and cultural values, specifically concerning gender and sexuality.

Applying a gender perspective explicitly to the lived religion framework provides further context for my original question, that is: are women religious more likely to invest themselves in environmental justice efforts, compared to the male clergy, because of their position within the Catholic Church? The gendered division of Catholic religious life may work to reflect and reinforce affiliations between women and nature, and the feminized

systems of care concerning the environment (Plumwood 1993; Taylor 2007). This is not true across the board, of course, as there are male members of the Church, including the Pope (Francis 2015), who do engage in environmental justice and care.

Still, it is not a question of ‘masculine’ Catholicism and ‘feminine’ Catholicism, for binary oppositions like such are the crux of the issue. So too, lived religion has served to critique the binary between religion and secularism, one which is “doubly gendered” as “women are linked with religion and men with secularism, and religious women represent subordination and non-feminism while secular women embody liberation and feminism” (Nyhagen 2017, p. 498). Likewise, constructed binaries between nature and culture, nature and reason, and the spiritual and the material work to compound this rift. Religion, and *lived* religion above all, would fall on the same side as ‘nature’ within this binary structure, as Val Plumwood (1993) distinguished “nature, as the excluded and devalued contrast of reason, includes the emotions, the body, the passions, animality, the primitive or uncivilized, the non-human world, matter, physicality, and sense experience, as well as the sphere of irrationality, of faith and of madness” (pp. 19-20). Lived religion (Ammerman 2016), *viriditas* in this case, works to challenge such binaries. Therefore, with these cultural bifurcations in mind, and in an effort to further incorporate environmental considerations, I offer this ecofeminist approach to the study of lived religion.

Gendered Earth & the Sacramental Imagination

Ecofeminist perspectives have certainly danced with the relational and reflective qualities of Durkheim’s sociological theories of religion, but *viriditas* puts the two frameworks directly in contact. Religious thought has often bolstered gendered conceptions of nature; the origin of *viriditas* is no different. “Menstruation indicates her greenness,” Hildegard von Bingen wrote (Berger, M. 1999, p. 82), one of her many instances of linking

viridis generative energy to processes of fertility, reproduction, and birth. Therefore, when made synonymous with fertility, *viriditas* was often gendered as feminine, sexed as female.

However, Hildegard equally recognized a “virile” *viriditas* in male reproductive capacity (Berger, M. 1999). Unfortunately, though, her medieval understanding of virility is not currently constructive for an ecofeminist understanding of *viriditas*, as the common metaphor of the time was the dominating image of ‘ploughing soil’: “For woman is now like soil that is ploughed with a plough. She receives man’s semen.... the seed develops until it is infused with the breath of life and until the time is ripe for it to come forth” (Berger, M. 1999, p. 81).

It is notable, however, the continued reliance on agricultural imagery to describe *viriditas* in sexual reproduction. Regardless, there is opportunity here to address any lingering concern that ecofeminism is “inevitably based on gynocentric essentialism” (Plumwood 1993, p. 8), or that *viriditas* works to encourage a line of ecospiritualist essentialism (Banerjee & Bell 2007). Rather, I find that *viriditas* as lived religion presents opportunities for its experience beyond fertility and sexual reproduction, beyond the feminine, and beyond the gender binary. That is, *viriditas* is feminist, not inherently feminine.

Women religious hold a unique stake in this conversation, as women who have taken vows of chastity, and as many have worked to reclaim the value of the feminine in perceptions of the divine, as well as in nature. I discussed these feminine, and feminist, dimensions with sisters at Sinsinawa Mound. Sister Christin maintained that “feminine imagery for earth certainly wasn’t new,” sharing that “I think this has always been a part of our Catholic tradition, and we’re in a moment perhaps of reclaiming it. And part of that is recognizing the wholeness of both masculine and feminine imagery.” She pointed to the influence of Pope Francis, too, who framed his encyclical, *Laudato si’*, with feminine

conceptions of nature (see Appendix A). “I think what Pope Francis and *Laudato si*’ has done is put that language more in the mainstream...and in theological discourse,” Christin added.

In fact, Pope Francis (2015) began his encyclical with a portrait of a feminine Earth: “our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us” (p. 3). The dual role of Earth as sister and mother is not unusual, but it is suggestive of its cultural function and reflection, as ‘sister’ is ambiguously feminine, whereas ‘mother’ implies reproduction and generative energy.

Nature reflects society, and thus the sins of society, Pope Francis argued, as “we have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts...is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life” (2015, p. 3). His language here suggests *viriditas*, linking the body to the elementary makeup of the earth. Continuing, he relied, much like Hildegard, on the effectiveness of presenting the body as microcosm: “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth; our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.” (2015, p. 3) With this, Pope Francis sought to remind Catholics that ‘our common home’ is within and without us, just as Hildegard declared, “The entire creation is within them” (Berger, M. 1999, p. 36).

This rhetoric was just a launching point for the sisters. Following Durkheim, experiences of the divine, society, and as I have argued, nature, are analogous. Thus, the cultural imagery, masculine and feminine, applied to nature is equally relevant to the imagery applied to God, and vice-versa. But ultimately, the sisters did not rely on gendered or sexualized images of Earth to shape their environmentalism, nor their experiences of *viriditas*. Rather, their discourse implied *viridis* experiences of the material earth, the social, and the divine beyond the gender binary. Again, this direction points to the ecofeminist,

rather than the innately feminine, qualities of *viriditas*. Still, there is of course room for the feminine in ecofeminism, as Sister Christin demonstrated:

I do think there's a way that reclaiming the ability to see the feminine, and the sacredness of the feminine, in this world that we're currently existing in that's been built on centuries of patriarchy and all the '-isms,' I think that's really important. And at the same time, that imagery can never contain the wholeness of the mystery we're trying to describe. Both the masculine and feminine imagery are a part of how I think about God, but it's not the whole picture.

Reclaiming the “sacredness of the feminine,” in this sense, is an act of resistance. And if *viriditas* is to be truly relational, one cannot ignore the political dimensions of its experience, those which combat systems of domination. It becomes impossible to accept injustice and oppression toward nature, fellow humans, fellow beings, when they reflect one another. Recognizing the “greenness” within all is imparting sacred standing to all. As Sister Alice Ann told me, “We, as humans, will deplete the greenness if we don't learn about relationship. So, it provides a very deep justice question about who owns the land and who gets to forest it, or plant it, or mine it, without consideration of all relationships.”

I find that relationality breeds intersectionality, the kind that works against the myriad (eco)feminist ‘traps’ that have hindered the approach for some time. Heterosexism, transphobia, racism, classism, ableism, ageism (Downie 2014; Gaard 1997; hooks 1982; Lorde 1984; Warren 2000)—there is much effort to carry ecofeminism past these barriers of exclusivity and essentialism. I offer *viriditas* to serve in that direction as well.

Discourse: Beyond the Gender Binary

The sisters' discourse has demonstrated to me how *viriditas* serves as feminist resistance, rather than feminine labelling, within the sacramental imagination. Sister Miriam Brown made clear, “I don't think in terms of gender. But I think the bringing-forward of the feminine is a correction of the overemphasis of God the Father. So, people have begun to say Mother God and so on, and that's fine.” However, she explained how she personally thinks in

terms that “aren’t necessarily masculine or feminine, but rather the energies, the God presence, within all.”

Sister Sheila agreed, “It is this force that continues to move all of us, through all of us, through all Creation.” Before, “God was kind of this formed thing, and we’ve been able to break out of that and go beyond that,” Sheila added. This shift in discourse, moving toward language that centered on “mystery,” “energy,” “presence,” and “force” was revealing, for neither is *viriditas* is a “formed thing,” but rather a dynamic experience of the relational alive.

Sister Marie Louise chimed in at this point, “My image of God has changed drastically because of my relationship with nature.” She explained, “The whole sense of the presence of the mystery that we refer to as God—whether it is God Father or God Mother—is not my language anymore. My language is more of a presence. And I feel that presence very much in nature.”

Thus, experience of the *creator* beyond the gender binary implies experience of the *creation* beyond the gender binary. So too, experiencing *viriditas* is about navigating these layers of genders, sexualities, embodiments, and ecologies. Likewise, *viriditas* may serve as means for queer ecofeminist perspectives—examinations of queer ecologies and queer agricultures, for example—to engage with the study of lived religion.

It may feel awkward, even confrontational, to bring a queer perspective into the sacramental imagination, as the Church has failed many times to welcome the fullness of queer identity within its communities and the sanctity of its sacramental traditions. Nevertheless, my hope here is that simply the attempt to put these perspectives in conversation may open the space needed to contemplate phenomenologies beyond the gender binary. *Viriditas* as lived religion creates the sort of extra-institutional context in which these conversations can grow.

IV. Situating *Viriditas* in Agroecosystems

Agriculture & the Sacramental Imagination

Viriditas as lived religion is tied to a sense of place—a relationality that is both social and ecological. As I have examined *viridis* experience in native prairie restoration sites, I now situate *viriditas* in the agroecosystems at Sinsinawa Mound.

The Mound's agricultural history has informed the community's land ministry efforts today, working to further contextualize agroecosystems within the sacramental imagination. The Sinsinawa community currently oversees 200 acres of organic row crops, gardens that supplement the Mound's kitchens, and a Collaborative Farm. Granted, very few sisters engage directly in agricultural practice these days—circumstances which can be largely attributed to the realities of an aging community. During the course of this research, Christin Tomy was the only sister I knew of who participated physically in work at the Mound's gardens and farm.

Instead, a local farmer, Bernard “Bernie” Runde, was hired several years ago to manage the 200 acres of land dedicated to row crops, cultivating a rotation of organic corn, soy, wheat, and alfalfa as feed for their dairy herds. Then, the Collaborative Farm was established in 2017 as a way to provide land access to limited-resource or beginning farmers, those who are “socially disadvantaged” according to the USDA, which includes American Indians or Alaskan Natives, Asians, Blacks or African Americans, Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, Hispanics, and women” (USDA ERS 2019). Although open to the full range of groups, when the Collaborative Farm began accepting applications “it was all women who applied,” Sister Sheila Fitzgerald told me. “It seemed like that’s where the need was strongest.”

So, although few sisters currently participate directly in agricultural practices at the Mound, they have engaged with the land in other capacities. Sheila Fitzgerald chaired the

Land Stewardship Committee, which proposed the Collaborative Farm and outlined the land ministry efforts now being carried out at the Mound. Marie Louise Seckar remembered her time working in the greenhouse and managing the Sinsinawa gardens and orchards. Miriam Brown was a key leader in the Church's Center for Land and People (now the Food, Faith, and Farming Network), as was Sheila Fitzgerald, during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s. Many sisters have also led spiritual retreats and/or environmental education programs at one time or another.

This strong agricultural and environmental foundation has allowed the Sinsinawa community to continue their mission, even as the physical labor on the land has come to rely more on lay partnerships. Sister Alice Ann has observed these efforts at the Mound and feels optimistic: "Our understanding, our presence on this land, is that we're collaborative with the land, as well as the people who happen to be farming it." *Viriditas'* relationality, I argue, is reflected in the nuns' social justice efforts, such as providing land access and resources to beginning farmers. Alice Ann affirmed, "We definitely have been called at this point to restore the land and to use it to help others understand how sacred it is, and how generous it is, and how beautiful it is." She then added, "It itself is a sacrament of creation." Indeed, how might the land, and farming the land, be a sacrament of creation?

Standing in a pasture, sheep nibbling at my pantleg, I listened as Sister Christin recounted some of the agricultural history of the Mound. She said, "Ever since the Sinsinawa community was founded, farming was a part of life here." And as for today, she continued, "I think reclaiming that agricultural history as part of our story, and continuing to try to do it in a way that's appropriate for our modern context, and is sustainable and forward-looking, definitely is part of what we're trying to do to respect the spirit of the land."

For generations, sisters at Sinsinawa Mound have situated agricultural practices and spaces within the sacramental imagination; and today, that standing has become all the more

explicit and intentional. Endued with a sense of *viriditas*, farming as practice becomes part of the religious sphere—it becomes ritual. Establishing farming as a “sacrament of creation,” therefore, is to recognize and respect the “spirit of the land.” And to know that spirit is to experience *viriditas*.

Taylor (2007) has identified similar experiences among women religious, centered around the notion of “sacred agriculture as priestly practice.” That is, “to work in the garden is to engage prayerfully with the land; to serve others through its gifts; to create gentler ways to work with the land to meet human needs; and to be deepened, delighted, and spiritually renewed in the process” (Taylor 2007, pp. 185-86). *Viriditas*, situated in agroecosystems, echoes these findings as well.

I now return to the conversation that opened this thesis, one between five sisters and myself, gathered in a Zoom meeting. It was then that Sister Alice Ann pointed to “all the relationships that help to make a place green, rather than a place that has no life.” And Sinsinawa Mound abounds with such verdant and “green” places—prairie, forest, and farmland. Agroecosystems, by definition, integrate both social and ecological relationships, those that make spaces “green.”

However, the sisters considered both the relationships and the tensions that contribute to the sense of “greenness,” as well as “dryness”—*viriditas* and *ariditas*—within agricultural systems. Sheila began, “For me, dryness means loss of life, and loss of greenness, and loss of potential.” She recalled what it was like to grow up on a farm:

I mean, how critical was it to have rainfall to nourish the crops, to bring forth the greenness? And when you didn’t, what remained was death, the loss of life, not only for the potential of the crops that were to grow, but also for the human community, all of those who share in the fruits of that.

Like *viriditas*, *ariditas* manifests ecologically and socially. And therefore, not all farming practices foster *viridis* experience. After witnessing the industrialization and consolidation of neighboring farms, and many farms throughout the Midwest, the sisters felt

that agribusiness had “come in and dried up the joy of farming.” Sister Miriam Brown thought back to her advocacy and community organizing work with Sheila during the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, noting how the language around farming had changed from “I have a vocation. I am working with the land. I’m making it fruitful and improving year by year” to the idea of “the bottom line, money, business, and so on.” Miriam sighed, “And you could just see people wilting.”

Sheila responded, saying how she attributed that shift in attitude to a “loss of relationship,” both within human communities and between people and the land. That is why, Sheila argued, “we find ourselves there today, back in the same position we were, Miriam, in the ‘80s.”

Truly, the predominate model of agriculture in the United States today is industrial, large, and void of *viriditas*. However, in the attempt to embrace agriculture as sacred, as part of the sacramental imagination, farming practices at the Mound are thus enriched with the capacity for *viridis* experience. *Viriditas*, then, brings attention to the rural, the regenerative, and the relational aspects of agriculture.

Viriditas & the Immediacy of Agriculture

Agroecosystems and agricultural practice hold a kind of immediacy, or intimacy, that lends itself to cultivating *viridis* experience. The agroecosystem is an environment that is directly social, and *becomes* human as hands touch soil and as people eat and digest the products of ecological and human labor. Unlike the Romantic notions of “wilderness,” *viridis* experience within agroecosystems does not attempt to hide the social relationships, nor the social reflections, which manipulate, and are formed by, such ecologies. Agroecosystems are no less “nature” than wilderness, but the social entanglements within them are more visible and immediate.

Sister Christin spoke to this sense of reflectivity and the relational alive when she told me how “committing my life to this community [of sisters], somehow informs my agricultural awareness.” That relationship moves both ways, as she continued to say, “What I’m learning—you know, as a city girl who’s been farming for four years—what I’m learning about the community of life through my work with the land also, somehow, maybe even on a mystical level, shapes and informs my ability to participate in community with my sisters.”

More broadly, Sister Marie Louise has looked to agricultural processes to inspire social action:

I always think in terms of what happens when you put a seed in the ground and the time it takes to germinate and grow. There’s a vibrancy and a vigor to those seeds that lends itself, in my thinking, to what’s happening and what needs to happen to all of us in this time of real paradigm shift, of growth in consciousness. I always look to nature to remind me of that.

Again, Marie Louise here has realized the Durkheimian aptitude to identify social experience in nature. This generative energy, *viriditas*, is not only agricultural—in the instance of germinating seeds—but also societal in its the potential for community action and “paradigm shift.” *Viriditas*, situated in agroecosystems, therefore reaches beyond the agricultural sphere, to a greater social revolution, or revelation—or at least the hope for one—that seeks a transformation of society to a system that lives in better relationship to the environment and all the beings within it.

V. Conclusion

Viriditas acts as the mirror between sacred nature and the relational self. I have presented this ethnographic portrait of *viridis* experience as a sociological examination of the relational, reflective qualities of lived religion. So too, *viriditas* has served as an invitation for several novel perspectives within the sacramental imagination and the study of lived religion. As a phenomenology of the relational alive, it affirms Durkheim’s understanding of religion and society as both collective and reflective. And within this framework, *viriditas* further

incorporates perceptions of nature and concerns of environmental justice. I have paired the feminist leanings of lived religion with an ecological understanding of *viriditas* to offer an ecofeminist approach to this study of “lived” Catholicism and the sacramental imagination. In so doing, I hope to generate conversation that explores conceptions of nature, society, and the divine beyond the confines of the gender binary.

Further, just as lived religion emphasizes extra-institutional, everyday experiences of the divine expressed via embodiment, discourse, and materiality, *viriditas* demonstrates the relevance of religion to concerns of gender, sexuality, environmentalism, social justice, and more. *Viridis* experience thus stands in contrast to arguments that the beliefs and practices of the modern era are unavoidably defined by disenchantment and secularism (Weber 2020/1917; Berger, P.L. 1999).

Women religious hold a unique position in this debate, as well as within the institutional Church itself, as many sisters have worked to bring an ecofeminist perspective to Catholic environmentalism and agrarianism. Sisters at Sinsinawa Mound specifically have embraced agroecosystems within the sacramental imagination, reframing agricultural practice as ritual and sacrament. Doing so imparts *viriditas* with certain social and environmental justice implications. As Taylor (2007) has summarized, “In the ‘intergradations’ of Catholic vowed religious life and the culture of American environmentalism, green sisters in effect simultaneously embody resistance toward and creative affirmation of both tradition and change, reconciling the inherent conflicts between institutional heritage and grassroots community adaptation” (p. 77). Sisters at Sinsinawa Mound contribute to this effort. Ultimately then, *viriditas* serves as a means to reflect on social experiences deeply imbued with religious and ecological significance.

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Appendix A

An Excerpt from Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato si'*

1. "*Laudato si', mi' Signore*" – "Praise be to you, my Lord". In the words of this beautiful canticle, Saint Francis of Assisi reminds us that our common home is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. "Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs."

2. This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (*Rom 8:22*). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. *Gen 2:7*); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.

(p. 3-4)

Appendix B

Sinsinawa Mound Land Acknowledgment

Sinsinawa Mound is located in the unglaciated, “driftless” bioregion of southwest Wisconsin, the ancestral homeland of the Ho-Chunk, Sauk, and Meskwaki Nations. The Dominican Sisters of Sinsinawa have occupied this land since 1847. In respect for the inherent sovereignty of the First Nations of Wisconsin, this history of colonization informs the sisters’ efforts for collaboration with both people and the land.

Appendix C

Dominican Mission & Vision for Sinsinawa Mound

MISSION

As Sinsinawa Dominican women, we are called to proclaim the Gospel through the ministry of preaching and teaching in order to participate in the building of a holy and just Church and society.

VISION

In a world graced by the Holy Spirit, yet wounded by divisions, exploitation, and oppression, we are impelled by God's tender mercy to commit ourselves in partnership with others to seek and foster right relationships among all God's people and with Earth that sustains us.

Appendix D

“Spirit of the Land”

Find the film on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/nNCLWbdTYP0>

This short documentary film was born of the collaborative effort of myself, sisters, and staff at Sinsinawa Mound. It was the sisters’ intention to showcase the “spirit of the land” at Sinsinawa, thus the title of the film. At their suggestion, I have also incorporated excerpts from Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Laudato si’*, to structure the themes of the film.

The featured footage was recorded by Sister Christin Tomy and myself between July 2020 and January 2021. It documents the land ministry efforts at the Mound, with particular focus on their Collaborative Farm. I have included interviews conducted with Sister Christin Tomy and collaborative farmer Andie Donnan as they speak to themes of sustainable agriculture, land access, communities of women, and environmental care. The sisters at Sinsinawa have reflected on the question: What does the land ask of us? Therefore, their intention behind this film was to allow the “land to speak” as we as humans learn how to better listen.